

Chapter 1 —The Eve of War

Green eyes looked up expectantly at the sky, watching the small gray figure descended upon the dusty window. Frail, eager hands carefully reached for the nearby handle and opened the window just as a breeze of fresh morning air entered the room.

She breathed deeply, closing her eyes and waited as a fine eagle owl landed silently on the windowsill, giving a soft hoot to call her attention. Smiling softly, she reached over to stroke it, causing the owl to hoot again— this time affectionately— as it seemed to recognize her.

“Good morning.”

The girl in question turned around in slight surprise and came face to face with a tall, handsome young man behind her. Blinking, she looked up at the same emerald green eyes looking at her with the same questioning look.

“Harry. You’re up.” She whispered softly, looking around the room to make sure none of their relatives could hear them. She gave her twin brother a small smile and walked over to him, a familiar owl perched on her arm.

Harry nodded, giving her his crooked smile as he watched her unhook the small piece of parchment attached to the owl’s leg. “It was about time that boyfriend of yours sent us a letter. What did he say?” He asked curiously.

AJ grinned and sat down on the edge of the bed that more than filled the small but spacious room. A rather large mirror stood in front of her, allowing her to see both her and her brother’s reflection, their raven black hair reflecting the light that shown from the window.

“Actually... Harry, it’s from Draco’s father. It’s about the surprise party we’re all planning for Draco on his birthday. He says he’ll have us picked up tomorrow before lunch by some of his house elves. We’ll be traveling to their summer rest house by floo powder.” She answered him, scanning the letter briefly.

Harry looked worried. "Floo powder? Won't that be dangerous? I mean... Considering that Volde—"

"Yes, er. He assures us that the Malfoys have their own private floo network specifically made for use of any member of their family. It's completely safe and untrackable. All of the other guests will be using it." AJ rushed out, trembling slightly at Harry's near mention of the name.

"Oh. Alright. Can't have Voldemort killing off more people now can we?" Harry drawled darkly, his eyes blackening dangerously as a scene that had happened not so long ago flashed in his mind.

AJ held her breath tautly, biting her lip as she felt the familiar sting in the corners of her eyes. She knew what Harry was talking about... And though she hadn't witnessed the same amount of horror her brother had seen that night, she knew Harry had never walked out of that graveyard the same person.

It had only a couple of months ago when it had all happened.

She had known from the very start that it was a mistake for him to have ever joined the TriWizard Tournament at the age of fourteen. She knew it from the moment the Goblet of Fire had sprouted the slip of paper with his name sprawled haphazardly on it.

Harry knew it then as well. But he was a Slytherin... Driven by ambition and power. Despite his hesitation, it only took a few encouraging pats and cheers from his friends and housemates before he had agreed to accept the position. Only to have it end in bloodshed. And death.

Death... AJ thought, shuddering in spite of herself.

She had never seen a dead body before. Not consciously at least. She was an infant the night their parents had been murdered. But Cedric...

Cedric... AJ thought, her eyes filling with unshed tears. He had been a friend of hers. A wonderful gentleman and a loyal individual. He hadn't deserved what had happened to him that night. No one did. No

one deserved to die in the cold, callous way Cedric had been murdered.

The events of that night all seemed like a blur to her when she thought about it now. She couldn't remember everything that had happened. Only that Voldemort had returned that night... And that Cedric had been killed...

She had seen it that night. Seen it in her dream... Harry's memories. She didn't know what had happened... Or how she had seen or felt what Harry had felt that night. But she saw vividly. Everything that had happened.

She saw his pain.

Flashback

"He's back! Voldemort! He's back!" Harry had shouted frantically as he stumbled onto the deserted Quidditch field that night, clutching Cedric's lifeless body as he made to speak the truth to Dumbledore.

"I saw him, Headmaster! Professor! He's back! He's used my blood and now he lives! We're all going to die if we don't do something now! We have to fight!" He shouted furiously again, his eyes eerily insane as it riveted from one form to another.

"Harry...Calm down... Let go of Cedric first, Harry—" Dumbledore started but Harry exploded once more, his eyes wild as he raised his wand and pointed it at him, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Calm down?! VOLDEMORT'S ALIVE, YOU POMPOUS OLD FOOL! He lives! And if we keep calm and stay here like sitting ducks, we're all going to DIE!" Harry screamed, a sob escaping his throat. His eyes now darted wildly from one approaching professor to another.

"Mr. Potter, please—"

"STAY AWAY FROM ME!" Harry yelled at Professor McGonagall, causing her to take a step back in slight fear as Harry began to glow an eerie bright green, his eyes glittering maliciously.

“Harry—”

“Where’s my sister?! Where is she?!” Harry demanded, his voice bubbling with anger as his hands shook, struggling to keep up with Cedric’s weight while he continually backed away from the approaching students and teachers from the stands.

“Harry, we... We don’t know. She, Mr. Malfoy and Ms. Granger all seem to have disappeared about an hour after you had entered the maze.” Dumbledore tried to reason with him calmly, holding a hand out in an effort to calm the raven-haired Slytherin.

“You... You sick fool! Where are they?! What have you done with them?? You’re working for Voldemort too, aren’t you?! AREN’T YOU?!” Harry screamed at him, raising his wand and sending a flurry of spells towards Dumbledore.

By that time, the students who had been watching the tournament from the stands had now circled around Harry and Dumbledore on the field and had all gasped audibly in fear at the spells Harry had sent towards their headmaster.

Dumbledore didn’t blink however and merely waved his wand slowly, causing the spells to die out. Harry shook with anger but weakened slightly, dropping Cedric’s body slowly to the ground.

“Wh-What have you done...? What have you done to my son?!” Amos Diggory sputtered as he rushed down from the top of the stands, his eyes wide and teary as he reached his son. In utmost rage, he shoved the Slytherin away from Cedric’s lifeless body and knelt down beside him, trembling violently.

“M-my son!! M-my boy!!” He screamed in agony, collapsing onto his body and filling the frightened, silent atmosphere that had fallen upon the students with his anguished sobs, his body shaking and his screams echoing in the night.

Harry couldn’t watch as he backed away from them all. Dumbledore...His teachers...His classmates... Some of whom were crying softly whilst others were staring at him in question...Perhaps wondering if he had killed the Hufflepuff himself..

"I-I didn't.... I didn't k-kill him...I d-d-" Harry spluttered, backing away shakily, his vision blurring with the tears that had begun to pool around his eyes.

"I d-didn't..."

"Harry, please. Come here."

Somewhere along the back of his mind, he heard the calm reassuring voice of Professor Snape but he refused to register it, merely continuing to back away. He barely noticed when his foot caught upon an uprooted root and he tripped painfully onto the rocky ground.

"Harry." It was Dumbledore's voice this time but Harry was gone now as he stared at Cedric's body again, this time his eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

His voice shook.

"I'm not a killer."

End of Flashback

AJ was crying as she closed her eyes, willing herself to forget. She hadn't told Harry she knew but she could see the pain in his eyes. Every night, since the death of Cedric, she knew how much Harry had blamed himself. How he thought it had been him who had killed the Hufflepuff.

She knew Harry hadn't liked Cedric. Nor had Harry ever cared about the other boy's well-being. But she also knew her brother well enough to be sure of the fact that Harry would have never wanted him... Or anyone else... dead. She knew Harry more than anyone else in this world... And she knew that despite what everyone thought of him and his personality, he was no killer. He would never kill another person for the sake of sadistic pleasure.

She only hoped he knew that too.

Things were never really quite the same ever since that night.

Harry Potter, at the age of fourteen, had been the youngest wizard to have won the TriWizard tournament. But all around the Wizarding world was uproar of conflicting beliefs and loyalties. Not many people believed Harry Potter that night. In fact, the Ministry had up to this point been reassuring everyone by every means necessary that Harry was in fact, a lying rebellious teenager who was trying to gain their attention.

Their newspapers and articles spoke nothing else than of their claim that Harry was a troubled boy who thrived in seeking attention. It had gone as far as people escalating theories that Harry Potter would be the next Dark Lord and was a case that had to be silenced immediately— expelled from Hogwarts so as not to harm any of their children.

Harry was silent of course. He never showed AJ how much this all bothered him. Or hurt him. In fact, he had spent most of the summer locked up in their room, reading up on books he wouldn't let AJ read and writing owls to Hermione, whom AJ knew Harry missed terribly.

He hadn't allowed the Gryffindor to visit them however, fearing her safety but AJ found him staring into the fireplace at night, humming a familiar melody to himself.

There were lots of times AJ had written to Hermione herself, telling her of how much Harry was scaring her. She had tried all summer to talk to him of the incident... but to no avail. It seemed Harry was avoiding it altogether. Almost as if it had never happened to him... Or so he had led himself to believe.

What scared her most was the dark look she could see in his eyes whenever he sat in one corner of the room and read his books. He wouldn't talk to her about anything... Nor would he talk to her about his thoughts. He still looked out for her, of course... And still showed her how much he loved her.

But it wasn't enough. AJ felt this huge wall between them. Almost as if there were so many secrets that he refused to tell her. And it scared to her not knowing what he was thinking. It scared her so much that

she would find herself praying every night, hoping she would wake up and he would still be by her side.

She wrote Draco numerous times about this but he had always assured her to trust Harry, telling her everything was going to be alright and that Harry knew what he was doing. AJ was beginning to get the hint that whatever it was Harry was hiding, Draco knew as well but she knew better than to exasperate her boyfriend about it.

One thing was for sure though. Harry was darker now. He had always been a loud and arrogant person before this who seemed to revel in displaying his conceitedness and authority to everyone else. But now he was just silent. Silent and mysterious. Brooding.

Truth be told, she actually preferred the loud, rude and foul-mouthed immature jerk she once knew strutting the corridors of Hogwarts with his Slytherin posse to the silent, malevolent, calculating presence he had now. It seemed everything he used to enjoy now eluded him and he was content to this one secret objective he had resigned himself to.

He was still as conceited as ever. But now, his eyes held more shadows mystery than the arrogance and amusement it used to hold before. It was almost as if... If the old Harry had to taunt and yell people in order to fear him, *this* Harry could evoke the same fear and respect— if not terror— the same way merely by his presence. That scared her.

Death can change people. A voice inside her head spoke softly. She knew that was right. Even *she* had changed. No question about it.

Cedric had been a close friend of hers. She had respected him even before she had gotten the chance to become his friend. To see him that night... Lifeless... With his usually twinkling eyes dead and lifeless, staring off into nothingness.

AJ took in a sharp breath, shaking visibly.

She didn't want to remember. She shuddered again as she recalled another vivid memory. That of Draco, convulsing in pain in front of her as the laughter of the man who had cast the Cruciatus curse on him echoed in her ears.

Everything that had happened that night, she didn't want to remember.

"Harry... *Please*...Talk to me. Like you used to. Let me help. Please." AJ implored gently, placing the letter on the dresser before she took a hesitant step toward his stiff form.

Harry winced at her tone but didn't move, his expression stony. "About what? I told you what happened that night. There's nothing to tell." He said softly, looking past her.

"No... Tell me how you feel. Tell me how much you're hurt. How much you're scared...and lonely. Hermione isn't here, Harry. But I am... And I want to feel what you're feeling. To share your pain. I won't let you face this alone." She told him, her hands trembling as she took his hands into them.

Harry didn't respond but lowered his gaze to the floor, his expression unchanging. "I can handle myself." He said, taking a deep, shaky breath.

"I know you can. But you have the entire world on your shoulders already, Harry. Let me share in that burden. Let me help you." She told him, urging him to look into her eyes.

He blinked but didn't move away when AJ hugged him tightly, her eyes clouding slightly in tears. "Talk to me. Like we used to... Let me help you. Let me see you, Harry." AJ pleaded, squeezing him tighter as though she was afraid of letting go.

Harry's eyes hardened and he pulled back sharply as though he had been stung. "Those days are dead." He said flatly, holding her at arm's length.

AJ blinked, clearly stung by his words but as soon as he had said them; he dropped his arms and offered her a calm smile, shaking his head to change the subject.

"Now, come on. Don't let me kill the mood for you, alright? Why don't you start packing your things for tomorrow? We'll be spending the night at Draco's so don't forget to bring extra clothes." He urged her

gently, leaning over to give her a kiss on the forehead, ruffling her hair.

AJ blinked again, clearly confused. "Harry—"

"I'll be fine, AJ." To prove his point, he laughed and shook his head, giving her a mock-glare. "I guess I'm just excited about tomorrow. It's been a long time since I've talked to our housemates." He reassured her, ruffling her hair again.

"Now get a move on... You wouldn't mind packing my stuff for me too, would you? Thanks." He said, grinning at her and waving her off before he turned to rifle through the books piled on the floor.

"Er...Uhm... Alright." AJ said hesitantly, hiding the hurt look on her face as she turned away from him and opened their closet, her mind racing with questions she wanted to scream at him.

"We'll talk about this some other time, then?" She asked after a brief moment of silence, turning to look at Harry once more but Harry had gone, along with the loads of books she had seen on the floor.

Hermione,

I fear it's gotten worse. He has nightmares at night you know. Horrible nightmares. Images so horrifying that he refuses to tell me anything.. Only that I needn't worry for he has everything under control. That he has a plan.

I'm scared, Hermione. Everyday we've spent away, I believe him to be changing into this completely different person. Someone we both never knew. I fear it's because of Cedric's death. He blames it on himself just like everyone else. I don't know how to help him anymore.

If you're reading this, please give him a call. Let him know you're there for him... And that you're willing to listen. I've tried to do the same but I'm afraid I haven't been able to reach him. I was hoping you could. After all, it was you who melted his heart. I'm hoping you could do it again.

I'm really sorry to keep bothering you like this. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit that for some reason, I feel like I can trust you with anything. We haven't been friends for that long yet but I feel like I've known you forever. Haha. Look at me, getting all sentimental. You tell anyone and you're dead, Granger.

Anyway, I was hoping that over the last week of our summer holidays, right before the day Dumbledore informed us we were going to stay somewhere else, if you could come and visit us here at Privet Drive? I'd really like to talk to you more... And truth be told, aside from Draco, you're the only person I seem to be able to talk to these days seeing as Harry simply refuses to tell me anything anymore. Blaise doesn't count. He's been in France all summer.

Owl me your answer soon. We'll be leaving tomorrow for Draco's surprise birthday party. I'd invite you but I'm afraid Draco's father is going to be there and well... You get the picture. Harry misses you terribly. So as I said, after you read this, please give him a call. He'll know how to use a telephone. Don't worry. Just make sure you don't mention anything about being a wizard to our aunt and uncle.

Hoping to hear from you soon, Hermione. Thank you for listening. Take care of yourself, you know how dangerous these times are.

Signed,

A.J. Potter

Hermione Granger smiled grimly to herself as she folded up the parchment in her hand and carefully stuck it into the bottom drawer of her dresser where the rest of the letters AJ had written her were kept. Owing to the length of the summer, and the somewhat fragile friendship that she and AJ had established just before the end of their fourth year, AJ had definitely given her an impressive pile of letters that taken up more than half of her drawer.

She didn't really mind however. Surprisingly, it was actually over this summer that she and the female Potter had gotten really close. Though AJ had initially written to her about her concern over her brother, the two girls found themselves sharing a bit of their interests

occasional bouts. It wasn't actually long before they had grown to be very comfortable around each other.

She had written to Harry about it and the boy had been ecstatic, telling her he encouraged their friendship and that he missed her terribly but as AJ had said, the Slytherin had told Hermione nothing of himself. Or of how he felt about the what's happened.

She asked him once only to have Harry write a letter of how much he wanted to be with her at the moment and... *Well...* Hermione blushed slightly. A lot of other stuff she didn't really want to go into detail about. It seemed he was avoiding her questions and concern altogether. She didn't like it.

Over the months they had spent apart, however, Hermione discovered a lot of things about Harry's twin sister and that comforted Hermione in the sense that her time apart from Harry had not gone to waste.

It had amused her to note that AJ's favorite color was in fact, not green, but *red* and that the Slytherin actually enjoyed the very same subjects that Hermione was taking in Hogwarts. If anything, AJ also loved shopping for muggle clothing, an interest which she and Hermione had promised to do together before the summer break was over.

An amusing discovery Hermione had enjoyed about AJ was that as beautiful as the girl was now, she had admitted to actually being quite homely when she was younger— a confession which Harry himself had, with a smirk, confirmed. The fact that AJ once had hair as short as a boy and that she was relatively small before a sudden growth spurt comforted Hermione immensely. Somehow, it made AJ more *human* to her. Someone she *could* actually become very close friends with.

In fact, after getting to know one another, Hermione could only wonder why they had *not* become friends to begin with. If only it wasn't for the stupid house rivalry, she was almost positive that they would have become the best of friends.

Stupid sorting. Hermione thought to herself, collapsing onto her bed and reaching for the phone on her bedside table.

She missed it however and accidentally knocked over the book she had been reading, causing her to exclaim in surprise and lean over to pick it up. Glancing at the cover slightly, her coffee brown eyes widened as she suddenly remembered what she had been reading before AJ's eagle owl had flown into her room.

Wizarding Families of the 18th Century. She read the title silently to herself, blinking in thought. It seemed she had not only learned about AJ Potter this summer. About a week after their fourth year, Hermione had been accompanied by her parents to Diagon Alley to search for new books for her to read over the break.

Luckily, in a dingy old bookshop, she had stumbled upon a fairly old and crumbling book about the early Wizarding bloodlines and their origins and as such, remembering the serpent mark she had seen on the back of Harry's shoulder, she immersed herself in it immediately.

She found herself reading the book more than once to take everything in almost as if she could find the answers she was looking for between its pages but sadly, she found nothing helpful for the many questions forming in her head.

All she had discovered so far was that everything people talked about the *Malfoy* and the *Potter* bloodline were true. They were in fact, two of the oldest living families that have ever existed in Wizarding England.

The other ancient families that have survived with into the present are very few in number. Among them were the *Blacks*, the *Longbottoms*, the *Weasleys* and the *Clayworths*, all of which have managed to maintain their pureblood status. Of course, however, for these families to maintain purity of blood, it was sometimes necessary to marry between far off cousins. Thus, in that regard, nearly every pureblood family these days was somehow related to all others. It was this fact that scared other wizards and allowed the eventual mixing of muggle blood into other families in the future.

Though it spoke of several accomplishments and as such, emblems of these families, Hermione could *not* find any additional information about the Potters nor anything that resembled the mark she had seen on Harry's shoulder.

She didn't know why she was particularly searching so hard for the answers to this but somehow, she knew that once she found out, she would be able to explain a lot about Harry's current behavior. Or why the dark-haired Slytherin was so powerful.

She didn't have time to dwell on it, however, as *Ferio*, AJ's eagle owl, nipped her finger lightly, hooting softly to snap her out of her thoughts. Hermione blinked for a moment. "Oh." She managed as she reached into her dresser and gave the handsome owl a small treat, which the animal happily accepted.

He allowed Hermione to stroke his feathers for a brief period of time before he hooted again in farewell and flew off into the night sky, leaving Hermione to her thoughts once more.

Before she could sink into another monologue with herself however, she shook her head and massaged her temples, knowing full well she wouldn't get any answers from drowning herself in her own questions.

Instead, she did as AJ told her to and reached for the pink receiver beside the bed, looking for the parchment with Harry's phone number. After punching in the digits into the muggle device, she lay back onto her soft covers, sighing contentedly.

It wasn't long that someone on the other line picked up, allowing her to hear a loud, scruffy voice. "Yeah, Whaddya want?" Came the unwelcome rasp, causing Hermione to wince at the loudness of the voice as she had to hold the phone slightly away from her ear.

"Hello, Mr. Dursley... Uhm... May I speak with Harry Potter, please?" Hermione asked politely as she twisted a strand of her wavy brown hair around her finger, making sure she sounded as normal as possible.

"Who is this? Are you one of them?? One of them freaks?! Cause if you are, let me tell you, I'm not afraid of you! Don't you dare come

near me or any of my family!" Vernon bellowed into the phone, his voice shaking slightly.

Hermione took a deep breath and tried to control her irritation, trying again. "No, Mr. Dursley... I'm not one of *them*...I'm simply... er... from the police station. I was hoping to talk to your nephew... it seems he has a criminal case." Hermione answered smartly, wincing from the outright lie.

"Oh... Well... In that case..." Hermione smirked as she heard the man conversing excitedly with his wife on the other end. After about a minute of muffled conversation, he spoke into the phone again. This time, more rationally.

"Very well. Hold on for just a second." He told her and soon after Hermione heard his heavy footsteps and his callous voice shouting upstairs for Harry.

"Quit shouting, Vernon." Came the cold reply as she heard Harry's lighter footsteps descending down the flight of stairs.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she heard Harry's voice telling his Uncle off before he picked up the phone, speaking softly but firmly into the receiver.

"I have no criminal record in this neighborhood but yes, how may I help you?" His voice sounded grim though Hermione could sense the irritation he felt at the accusation.

"Does the criminal record of not answering your girlfriend's letters fast enough count?" Hermione answered teasingly, laughing when she heard Harry's breathing hitch in his throat.

"Hermione..." Was all he said, his voice softening but the sheer gentleness of the tone made Hermione's heart melt.

She smiled into the receiver as she snuggled into her pillows, sighing. "I missed you, Harry. How have you been?" She asked him, wishing more than anything that she could have been there with him to see the expression on his face.

She could feel Harry smiling on the other line as he chuckled, the sexy sound sending shivers down Hermione's spine. "I've been missing a certain Gryffindork." He replied, his voice light and playful.

"I'm sorry I haven't been answering fast enough though, Mione. I've been reading a lot since the break." He admitted and Hermione heard him collapse onto a nearby chair.

Hermione switched the phone to other ear, her eyebrows scrunching together. "Reading? My my... Since when have you been a reader, Potter?" She masked her query with a tease.

He chuckled at her quip. "I've always enjoyed reading, Hermione. I just don't *love* it as much as you do." He retorted, smirking when he heard Hermione give a '*humph*' in response.

"What's been happening with the Wizarding world lately, anyway? I mean... I've been writing people letters... You, Draco and Sirius... but none of you seem to be telling me anything about what's been going on." Harry asked curiously, sounding slightly annoyed.

Hermione bit her lip, willing herself not to tell him how Dumbledore told them specifically to do the very thing Harry was complaining about. "Well... I suppose none of us want to worry you about useless things, Harry. Besides, we *do* tell you things. Just not things you don't need to know." She told him, trying to sound reassuring.

If anything, this seemed to upset the Slytherin even more.

"You know as well as I do, Hermione, that all this is driving me insane. I need to know more about the Wizarding world. You tell me of how people have been spreading rumors of how I may just be looking for attention but I don't know anything about the extent of that." He snapped.

Hermione bristled. "Well—"

"On top of everything else, I've been asking all of you to send me a copy of the *daily prophet* since you know we don't have access to a copy but *no one* has been responding to that either." Harry said flatly, his voice impatient.

“Oh, Harry... What makes you think I do?” She answered but Harry was on her, immediately, sounding both irate and confused at the same time.

“I thought you had a subscription!”

“Harry, I— Oh what does it matter? Why are you getting mad at me for? Why don’t you blame Malfoy?”

“Draco isn’t the one I’m talking to on the phone right now!”

“Yeah, imagine that. Like Malfoy would ever learn how to use a muggle phone.” Hermione quipped, trying to lighten the mood but Harry didn’t respond, merely sending them both into silence.

“Harry?”

Hermione sighed and sat up, now twirling the phone cord around her finger. “Look, I know it’s been difficult for you. But I promise... We *will* see each other soon. Alright? And by then, I’ll explain everything...*Everything* you need to know. I’ll answer every question. Right now... Just trust me. Be patient for a little while longer.” She spoke gently, trying to soothe him with her words.

She heard him sigh softly and took that as a sign to continue.

“Everything’s just been too hectic right now. But things *will* get better. I promise. And that isn’t too far off, Harry. I’ll be seeing you in about two weeks... And tomorrow, you’ll be going to Draco’s...You’ll have fun and relax. So please... Stop worrying about it for now... Can you do that?” She asked, waiting silently for his response.

Harry sighed again but Hermione knew she had won this argument. Soon enough, Harry spoke into the receiver again, his voice calm once more.

“Alright. Thank you... Hermione.” Was all he said and they were silent once more...Only this time, instead of an awkward silence, the silence comforted them both.

After a long moment, Harry spoke again, his voice an almost pleading whisper.

“I miss you so much, Hermione.”

Hermione felt a slight sting in the corners of her eyes but held them back, smiling to herself.

“I miss you too, Harry.”

“I’m sorry you can’t come tomorrow. But well...” Harry tried to explain but Hermione cut him off, sounding amused.

“You don’t have to explain anything, Harry. I understand. It’s dangerous for a muggleborn to be within Lucius Malfoy’s presence... Is that what you mean?” She asked but Harry only wished that were the case.

“Uhm... No. Actually, there are a lot of things you have yet to understand about the Malfoy family. It’s just that... well... it *is* Draco’s birthday and a lot of the people there are going to be his relatives.... And... well... not a lot of them understand exactly about muggleborn witches and wizards—”

“Oh.” Hermione deadpanned, ignoring the slight pain that came with what Harry was actually implying.

“No, no... love. *Please* don’t take that the wrong way. I didn’t mean it in the way you’re thinking. I’ve....told you how Lucius Malfoy is a spy for Voldemort. Should word come out that a muggleborn witch was at his son’s party, questions will be asked.” Harry said softly, sounding guilty.

Hermione relented, sighing. “I know, Harry.”

“Voldemort...He believes that Lucius allows his son to be our friend to spy on me. Your presence there might blow their cover and cause serious problems.” Harry continued, sounding downcast.

Hermione softened, managing a smile. “I understand. But Harry... I know you trust them... But given everything that’s happened... Are

you sure that party is not just some clever way of capturing you and AJ?" She asked, slightly worried.

Harry chuckled. "Hermione, I trust the Malfoys with my life. Dumbledore trusts them as well, just like he trusts Snape. You have no reason to suspect them." He assured her.

"But... Malfoy Manor... Isn't it—"

"We won't be going there as it's sure to be watched by death eaters everywhere. We'll be going to one of their summer rest houses in France. Zabini's already there with his family along with some of our other Slytherin friends. Not everyone in Slytherin's invited, of course. Not everyone knows about it. At least not the ones whose loyalties Lucius suspects. It's really just a small celebration, really." Harry explained.

"Knowing Malfoy, I have doubts about the *small celebration* part." Hermione pointed out, causing Harry to laugh.

"Yes, well... We can't afford to take any chances now. As added protection, Dumbledore'll be there along with Snape. They'll be using the *Fidelius* charm to make sure the rest house isn't seen by anyone who isn't invited. So I think we'll be safe." Harry finished, sighing.

"Oh. Alright then... Just be sure to write to me the minute you get back home, alright?" Hermione told him sharply, causing him to laugh again.

"I will, Mione. I promise." He responded, chuckling.

"Hermione! Dinner's ready!"

Hermione stood up upon hearing her mother's voice calling from downstairs, slipping her feet into her yellow bunny slippers.

"Harry? I've got to go, my mother's calling me to eat dinner downstairs. But I'll talk to you soon, okay?" She said, grasping the phone with both hands. She smiled at Harry's silence, almost feeling the Slytherin's disappointment through the phone.

"Alright... Uhm... Hermione...? I'm really glad you called. I missed hearing your voice." He told her softly.

"I know. I miss you too. More than anything, I wish I could see you right now." She told him wistfully

"Hermione Granger!"

Hermione winced again at the sound of her mother's voice.

"Harry, I've really got to go. Take care of yourself tomorrow... Alright?"

"I will. I love you."

"I...love you too." Hermione answered, feeling a pleasurable warmth spread over her body at the familiar words.

With that, she replaced the phone on her bedside table and bounded downstairs, more than eager to tell her parents about her wonderful conversation with her boyfriend.

"Harry? Are you finished yet? They're going to be here soon!"

Harry heard AJ's voice from outside the bathroom before glancing back at himself in the mirror, slipping the magical contacts over his emerald green eyes. He blinked rapidly, his eyes glassy for a moment before he placed his glasses back in their case.

"I'll just be about five more minutes, AJ." He answered, reaching behind the glass cabinet for his magical non-sticky hair gel.

"Ugh. Vain much, jerk-face?" Came the reply, causing him to laugh as he heard AJ's footsteps walking out of their bedroom.

Harry glanced at his reflection carefully, taking note of his appearance. Owing to the fact that he had locked himself in their room most of the summer, he was now as pale as ever. His eyes were glinted dangerously, cold and guarded while one corner of his lips lifted into a sneer.

Over the summer, when he had not been reading or reflecting to himself, he had forced himself to work out if just to get his mind off his anxiety. *It was probably worth it.* He thought, examining the firm but lean muscles on his upper body. He also noticed, as he inspected the fit of his black pants, that he had gotten taller and it paired off nicely with his toned form.

“Harry!”

He rolled his eyes in annoyance at hearing AJ’s voice again and went to work on his hair, arranging them into neat but attractive spikes on his head just as his twin sister opened the door and glared at him with narrowed, her arms crossed over her chest while one foot impatiently tapped the floor.

“Relax. I’m just about done.” He drawled, spraying himself with some aftershave before turning to flash her his pearly whites.

“Here are your robes. Get dressed. They’ll be here in about fifteen minutes.” She snapped, tossing him a set of dark emerald robes which Harry caught and, laughing, slipped it over his gray shirt and pants.

She swept past him into the bathroom, shoving him away from the mirror to examine her own reflection. Her black hair had grown longer now, and she left it falling gracefully just above her waist. Her eyes, although the same as Harry’s, were much more gentle and sparkled with warmth while her form, she blushed slightly, had over the summer acquired a bit more curves as the effects of female hormones have begun to strengthen.

Draco had always teased her about being, in his words, a ‘*skinny little brat*’. Well, she’d prove him wrong today. Or rather, as AJ thought to herself. *Tonight.* When she gave him what she planned to be her birthday gift.

She was wearing one of her favorite dress robes— a soft pink shade while the simplest of jewelry— just the necklace Draco had given her and small silver hoops for earrings. Something she didn’t usually do, however, was accentuate her delicate features with the slightest hint of make-up.

“You look beautiful.” Harry assured her, smiling as he bent down and dropped a kiss onto her forehead, exiting the bathroom to look for his shoes.

She smiled at her reflection, noticing the distinct glow on her features. She couldn’t tell what it was... But she had felt herself changing throughout the entire summer. Somehow becoming more independent. More mature about who she was.

She could only hope Draco would notice the change. And that he would appreciate the new person she was— little by little— becoming.

Exiting the room, and smiling as she noticed Harry’s elegant but very handsome appearance, she walked over to him and hugged him tightly from behind. “You look great, jerk-face. Let’s go wait downstairs.” She said, giving him a peck on the cheek before she bounded down the stairs.

Harry shook his head in amusement before he eyed himself one last time, stroking his chin to check the closeness of his shave before he followed after her, adjusting his emerald green robes as he walked.

It wasn’t long before they found themselves waiting in front of the fireplace once more, the Dursleys having told them the night before that they would not be in the house to witness another visit from another one of *their kind* into their home.

Harry knew, however, it was more for Dudley’s sake than for anyone else. A brief memory how Draco had picked them up last year resurfaced in his mind and he smirked in spite of himself, shaking his head.

“Who would be picking us up, anyway?” Harry asked, curious as AJ glanced at the watch on the wall behind them.

“Just several house-elves. Lucius figured it would be safer if he didn’t move around too much to keep from suspicions.” AJ explained, nervously adjusting her robe.

“Harry, do I look okay—”

Harry chuckled and turned her around to face him, poking her on the nose. "You look beautiful, AJ. Trust me. You always do." He assured her, squeezing her hand. AJ looked satisfied until Harry spoke again, smirking.

"If you like trolls." He teased, causing her to shoot daggers at him with her glare.

"Jerk-face."

Harry opened his mouth to respond but was immediately cut off by a puff of smoke from the fireplace, revealing two small but formally dressed house-elves.

"Mr. and Ms. Potter, Master Lucius has been waiting. Please. Come with us." One of them, the female house-elf, squeaked as she bowed and gestured for them to enter the fireplace.

"Allow Tinkle to help sirs and madams with their bags." The male house-elf added, bowing once more and easily flicking a hand to levitate their small bags, bringing them into the fireplace.

"Impeccable service." Harry commented, much to the delight of the house-elves but AJ elbowed him sharply, looking irritated.

"Well I for one, agree with Hermione. I dislike the fact that wizards subject house-elves to this form of slavery." She hissed under her breath so that the house-elves wouldn't hear her.

Harry rolled his eyes. Sometimes, he didn't like the influence Hermione had on his sister. He could have sworn she was turning AJ into a Gryffindor.

"Master Lucius provides special private floo powder. One does not need fire to use it. Once master and mistress has sprinkled floo powder, one will simply say *Montmayne* and will be taken to the Malfoy France rest house." Tinkle explained in a squeak to them, offering to them a pouch of floo powder.

“Will do, elf.” Harry answered curtly as he helped himself to a pinch of powder, and before AJ could utter another word, he had disappeared into a gust of green flames, leaving his sister glaring after him.

Flashing the house-elves an apologetic glance, she sprinkled the floor powder and did as she was told. Without a few seconds, she had stumbled onto another figure in front of her, bringing them both crashing to the floor.

“Watch it!” Harry snapped, standing up and brushing the dust off his robes just as AJ grabbed onto his arm to raise herself to her feet, taking in their surroundings with wide eyes.

Montmayne was evidently more than just a rest *house*, as Lucius Malfoy had explained to them in his letter. It was a rest *mansion* with a gleaming marble dance floor, expensive, elegant-looking furniture and a large crystal chandelier right in the middle of the large ballroom.

The windows had all been covered by velvet curtains to prevent any outsiders from looking in but the room was adorned with brilliant magical candles, all of which procuring a flame about the size of a man’s palm.

Although they had appeared directly into the large ballroom/dining room, AJ could tell that the house had more rooms than the large room they were in now as numerous doors and hallways led into the spacious area.

Small circular tables had been spread all around the room, covered with a gleaming white table cloth while a soft jazz tune was playing in the background amidst the many sounds of merry conversation all around.

In the front of the room was a small stage where the sign “*Happy Birthday, Draco!*” hung from, in big bold letters. Just in front of the fireplace was a large table of delicious food, all of which— AJ noticed— were among Draco’s favorites dishes.

Narcissa Malfoy, proud and beautiful as always in robes of vibrant blue, walked over to greet them, giving them both a gracious smile.

“Harry... Amanda. So glad you two could make it.” She greeted them, leaning slightly to give both Potters a peck on each side of their faces.

“It was our pleasure, Mrs. Malfoy. Are we the first to arrive?” Harry asked, giving her a grin as he looked around the large ballroom only to find that most of the guests were in fact, Draco’s relatives as most of them had varying shades of silver-blond hair.

Narcissa smiled, nodding. “Yes. I believe Blaise arrived a couple of minutes before you. As well as some other Slytherin friends of yours. They’re—” She turned around and glanced at the cluster of guests behind them.

“Well... They’re around here somewhere. Why don’t you go look for them? And— good heavens, Amanda, you look positively breathtaking.” She told AJ, smiling at her as she noticed her attire for the first time.

AJ blushed. “Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy. Uhm... When’s Draco arriving?” She asked, looking around.

“Oh he should be here soon, dear. He’s off with his father right now; Lucius will be bringing him here pretending he’s to introduce Draco to a private tutor for the rest of the summer. He has absolutely no idea.” She told them, chuckling.

Harry smirked. “Yeah, knowing how dense Draco is... You could bring him to the Gryffindor common room and he’d still ask you where he was.” Harry whispered to AJ, who giggled.

“Well dears, I’d better leave you two alone to mingle with your friends. Oh and don’t worry... Once dinner’s over, we adults will leave you children to have a nice peaceful tea party in the other ballroom. That way you kids can enjoy...er... louder music in here.” Narcissa assured them, winking before she turned and headed towards a group of older looking women, one of whom Harry was assuming to be Draco’s grandmother.

“Harry! AJ! When did you get here?” A familiar voice from behind them greeted and sure enough, the twins whirled around to see AJ’s

best friend Blaise Zabini grinning at them, a wine glass in his hand, a beautiful blonde girl in the other.

AJ raised an eyebrow as Blaise bent down to kiss her on the cheek, setting his wine glass down on the table. "Blaise... Who is—"

"Oh this is Caitlin. Draco's cousin. We had just met a couple of minutes ago. She's French so she studies in Beauxbatons." Blaise introduced them, giving Harry a wink which AJ failed to see.

Harry smirked and took Caitlin's hand in his own, giving it a lingering kiss. "*Enchante, Mademoiselle.*" He drawled, flashing her a charming smile.

Caitlin blushed slightly, giving him a slight curtsy. "'Arry Potter. I 'ave 'eard so much about you, from Draco. 'e never told me 'ow gorgeous you were, 'owever." She added flirtatiously, giving him a smirk so similar to Draco's that Harry recoiled slightly, a bit disturbed.

Blaise didn't bother hiding the snort that came out.

"And you... AJ Potter... You are my couzin's girlfriend... yes?" Caitlin inquired, staring curiously at the dark-haired girl. AJ nodded, offering the girl a friendly smile. "Yes, I am. Wow, I've never met one of Draco's relatives before. The resemblance you have to him is quite uncanny." She told the other girl, amazed as she took in the blonde hair, silver eyes and aristocratic features.

Caitlin laughed and nodded, looking yes. "Yes... Well... Malfoys are all very closely related so eet ees unavoidable that we look very much ze same. You, 'owever, 'e 'as told me so much about." She informed her, causing AJ to blush once more.

"Yes... Well enough about her then. Would you be so kind as to offer me a dance, Caitlin?" Harry asked, flashing his gorgeous smile and turning on the charm all the while ignoring the disapproving look AJ was giving him.

"I would love to, 'Arry." She replied, blushing as she took the hand offered to her and allowed Harry to guide her onto the dance floor.

Harry looked back and flashed both Blaise and AJ a triumphant smirk before he led Caitlin into a graceful dance.

"How could he do that to Hermione... He has a girlfriend and he goes off and flirts with another girl??" AJ hissed angrily to Blaise who laughed it off and shrugged, looking amused.

"Come on, AJ. He isn't serious with Caitlin. Call it his instinct to flirt naturally with beautiful girls. He does so with full intentions of not taking the attraction any further. That's how I am, at least." He told her, grinning.

AJ rolled her eyes. "Boys are so insensitive sometimes. They are so driven by hormones." She muttered darkly, walking over to a nearby table and plopping moodily onto an empty seat.

"Aw come on... We're not all bad. Besides, you *know* Harry more than anyone else. You *know* how much he loves Granger, right? He just flirts for fun... Besides.... I think we can all agree it might do him a bit of good to enjoy himself tonight at least." Blaise pointed out, his voice suddenly grim.

AJ didn't comment on that any further, letting them both fall into a tense silence.

"Never mind your brother right now, Potter. Aren't you even going to spare your best friend a dance? I *did* miss you, you know. You didn't miss me at all, did you?" Blaise mocked accused, glaring at her.

AJ rolled her eyes but laughed and stood up, allowing Blaise to steer her onto the dance floor. "Of course I did, you dramatic prat. I doubt *you* did, however. You were probably too busy flirting with all those French girls that you forgot about me." She quipped back, playing his game just as they started to dance to the lively music.

"Well *there is that*. Of course I forgot about my ugly, boring best friend." He retorted, causing AJ to growl and punch his arm. "Which by the way is looking very beautiful tonight." He corrected himself, wincing at the pain in his upper arm where AJ had hit him.

AJ smirked and allowed him to spin her around, giving her a brief view of the other guests who had just arrived.

"Parkinson and Perrine are here??" She asked in surprise, groaning out loud. "I would have thought their loyalties were rather questionable. I wonder why Lucius invited them." She said out loud, watching them from over Blaise's shoulder as they danced.

Blaise rolled his eyes. "AJ, just because you find their presence completely annoying doesn't mean they're followers of You-Know-Who. They adore Harry and Draco with a passion. I just don't see them going against them." He pointed out, snorting in derision.

"I suppose... Oh but Blaise they're such snobby, arrogant gits! I can't stand them!" AJ complained, watching as the two girls were followed by Theodore Nott and a couple of moments after, a dark-haired Ravenclaw seventh year AJ only knew as Nathaniel Townsend. He caught her eye and smiled briefly, causing AJ to blush at having been caught staring and look away.

"Hey, I'm not the one who used to have late night gossip sessions with them. And another thing, we're *Slytherins*, AJ. It's *natural* for us to be snobby arrogant gits! I don't understand what the big deal is." Blaise replied in slight irritation, looking pointedly at her.

"Well yeah... But... Well... I'm just saying I'm surprised. That's all. By the way, where are Crabbe and Goyle? Wouldn't be Draco's birthday without his cronies, wouldn't it?" She asked, looking confused.

Blaise shifted uncomfortably, choosing instead not to answer her question but to twirl her around once more.

"Blaise?" AJ asked, looking at him.

"Yeah... Well.. They were marked questionable so Lucius didn't have them invited." He answered, looking uncertain.

"You're kidding me... Crabbe and Goyle? Those two idiots would actually side with Voldemort?" AJ asked, angry and disbelieving at the same time.

Blaise winced slightly at the mention of the name but nodded, looking over AJ's shoulder. "Well... It isn't sure yet... But it's better safe than sorry, right?" He added, laughing nervously.

"Why don't we save this small talk for later, duchess? Your haughty boyfriend is here." He pointed out, raising an eyebrow in amusement when AJ spun around instantly, her eyes darting around to search for the familiar blonde Slytherin.

She didn't see him however but instead saw Lucius Malfoy, who had walked into the room with a mischievous smirk on his face, pressing a finger to his lips.

"Draco's outside, waiting for me to call him in. I'll count to three with my fingers... When I do, I'll call him in while you all yell surprise." Lucius explained to them, beckoning for them all to move closer to the entrance.

Harry grinned and had by then, stopped dancing with Caitlin, walking over to stand a couple of yards directly in front of the door where Draco would be entering. He wanted to see the look on his best friend's face after this.

Blaise and AJ immediately walked up next to him, AJ's heart pounding rapidly in her chest.

"One....Two...."

"Father, what's this all about? Why in Merlin's name would I have ever needed a tutor—" Draco Malfoy stopped midsentence just as he entered the large ballroom, his silver eyes going wide with surprise and confusion as he took in the scene in front of him.

"Three!"

"SURPRISE!"

Draco's jaw dropped, his expression going from shock to bewilderment to amazement as he tried to form a sentence with his words.

“Wha-Wha...? How? Wha...?” Was all he managed to splutter out, causing Harry to laugh loudly at how his usually eloquent best friend had become a stuttering idiot in front of him— a sight which amused not only him but all their other Slytherin housemates.

Draco reddened for a brief moment, finally taking everything in before he finally grinned and gave a short laugh just as Narcissa rushed forward and enveloped her only son in a tight embrace, kissing him on the cheek.

“Happy birthday, Draco! Your father and I both know how much you’ve worked hard on your grades last year... So we decided to throw you a little party as a reward.” She told him, kissing him again, causing Draco to grimace in embarrassment.

“Mother... Please. Not in front of guests. It isn’t seemly.” He reminded her, causing her to chuckle and pull away, nodding. “You’re right. Forgive me, son.” She agreed, smiling as Lucius walked over to Draco again, nodding.

“Well said, Draco. Though your mother is right and your grades have improved greatly last year... I shall settle for a simple thank you. I’ll let you enjoy the rest of your party.” He drawled, smirking when Narcissa gave him an icy glare.

AJ’s face darkened to a rich crimson as she turned to whisper something bitterly to Blaise. “Of course his grades improved. I was asleep for nearly the entire year. He took my place as second academically.” She muttered, looking forlorn.

Blaise rolled his eyes and gave her a pat on the hand before ignoring her completely, watching the scene unfold in front of him.

“Thank you so much. Mother. Father.” Draco acknowledged, giving them both a genuine smile which he transformed into a smirk when he looked at Harry across the room.

“What are you smirking at, Potter?” He taunted, rolling his eyes when Harry smirked wider, knowing full well his best friend was going to tease him about his mother’s open display of affection for the rest of the night.

“Happy birthday, Draco!” Soon came a chorus of greetings before Harry could say anything and before AJ could get any closer to Draco, he was enveloped in a sea of guests, all of which were showering him with compliments and greetings.

“Oh yeah. That reminds me. Where do we place our birthday presents?” Harry asked, looking around the room.

“I placed mine on the present table over there.” Blaise answered, pointing out the large table at the back of the room which had already been filled with large birthday presents.

“Alright. I’ll be back. Want me to put yours there too, AJ?” He asked, looking at his twin sister in query but AJ shook her head, blushing slightly. “No... Er... I think I’ll give Draco his present personally, Harry.” She answered, looking slightly uncomfortable.

Harry’s eyes narrowed but before he could ask anything, AJ had excused herself and braved into the sea of guests around Draco. Blaise smirked to himself, as though knowing what she meant but Harry shrugged to himself and walked over to the table, wondering what AJ could have possible have gotten for Draco.

He himself had gotten Draco a beautifully-hilted dagger the two boys had once seen at *Borgin and Burkes*. Draco had been reluctant to leave the store without it but the shopkeeper had insisted it was not for sale and was a precious artifact. After much convincing on Harry’s part, however, he was able to buy the dagger at a reasonable price.

By convincing though— Harry smirked to himself— He hadn’t been using conventional means. He’d explain it to Draco once he opened it. For now, he was content on watching as the blonde tried to make his way through the group of people crowding around him.

A/N: Forgive me. Still testing the waters before I dive into the pool. More in the next chapter. Please review!

Chapter 2 - Pureblood by Association

"Thank you. Ahaha. That's sweet Aunt Merlyn. Thank you. You shouldn't have, Caitlin. Thank you. Thank you, Uncle William. Thank you—" Draco muttered continually through clenched teeth, forcing a smile every now and then as he made his way through the crowd, searching for the familiar mane of raven black hair.

He didn't have to search far however as he soon saw AJ waiting in front of him, her dark hair long and silky as it fell gorgeously down to her waist. She flashed him a beautiful smile, causing his breath to hitch into his throat.

"Happy birthday, Draco."

She spoke softly, smiling when he walked up to her until they were almost nose to nose, staring right into her sparkling green eyes.

"Potter. You look as ugly as ever. What happened?" He teased, a small smirk on his face as AJ wrinkled her nose cutely at his taunt, narrowing her eyes.

"Careful, Malfoy. Don't think you can get away with jibes like that just because it's your birthday." AJ threatened lightly, clenching her fists but Draco just chuckled, wrapping his arms around her slender waist and pulling her close and reveling as he felt her body melt into his embrace.

"You look beautiful." He whispered into her ear, causing AJ to barely prevent causing a shiver to run down her spine at the desire she heard laced in his husky voice.

She melted, however, as she felt his hands exploring the curve of her hips, one of his eyebrows quirking in slight question. "Hmm... Now when did you acquire *these...*?" He murmured, caressing her waist.

AJ squirmed slightly, blushing under his hot gaze. Silver looked into emerald as Draco gave her a lazy smirk, his eyebrow still elegantly arched as he waited for her response.

Though the expression in his penetrating gaze was making her uncomfortable, AJ couldn't help the surge of desire that had overcome her form. Draco looked positively handsome that night.

He was wearing elegant black dress robes over a clean silver shirt and perfectly fitted black pants. From where she stood, she could smell his enticing aftershave as well as the scent she knew entirely was Draco's. His scent made her skin tingle and her mind dizzy. His hair, as always, was neatly gelled, although several strands were left to fall into his gorgeous silver eyes.

"Why? Like the change?" She answered nervously, trying to join in his banter but she soon cowered nervously when she the smoldering look in Draco's eyes as they feasted hungrily upon her lithe figure.

"You have... no idea..." He replied easily, bringing his eyes back up to give her a sexy grin. He seemed to understand AJ's uneasiness as he soon lifted the topic, trying to make her smile.

"Are you the same skinny brat I was with a year ago?" He teased, smirking when she stiffened in irritation, all sexual innuendos forgotten.

"One more crack out of you, Malfoy and I'm going to kick you where it hurts." AJ snapped at him, yanking herself out of his warm embrace.

Draco watched her closely, his silver eyes filled with amusement at the slightly nervous look in her beautiful green eyes. He could never get enough of that enthralling innocence that was just AJ. He had missed her so much.

Leaning forward so as to brush his lips against her ears again, he smiled lazily to himself before speaking. "Damn, Potter. You want me."

AJ sputtered in shock but didn't have any time to respond to his taunt as Draco had sauntered off towards Harry, laughing to himself at the expression he had left upon his girlfriend's face.

"You're lucky it's your birthday!"

As soon as all the guests had been seated, the house-elves had begun serving the meals one by one to each table while Draco was brought to the front of the room by his mother, who had insisted he grace his guests with a short speech.

Looking slightly miffed at the idea, Draco sighed and obliged by allowing his mother to point her wand at his throat and cast the *Sonorus* charm, magnifying his voice to the entire ballroom.

“Seeing as Mother probably won’t let me eat until I give this little obligatory speech...” He began, earning a few laughs from his friends. “I’d just like to thank everyone for being here tonight. It means a lot to me that you would all come here to celebrate my birthday despite the... dangerous times we know we live in at present.” He continued, looking briefly at Harry.

“I’d like to thank, more than anyone else, Father and Mother for this occasion.” Draco stated, turning to bow to his parents in acknowledgement. Lucius and Narcissa returned the gesture, both Malfoys smirking proudly.

“I mean... I *have* to thank them. If they hadn’t conceived me, I wouldn’t be here right now.” He said wryly, causing his Mother to shoot him a dangerous glare.

Draco winced but smirked, shaking his head. “But seriously... Thank you everyone. For being here. To my relatives, my schoolmates... My close friends. Thank you. Enjoy the party— all the adults will be leaving after dinner.” He added, winking as the crowd laughed and clapped in response.

Harry shook his head from where he sat beside Draco on the main table in front of his parents, whom at the moment were also shaking their head in either dismay or helpless amusement. He met AJ’s eyes from where she sat on the other side of Draco but all she could do was shrug, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

“Ah. Now that’s over... I’m starving.” Draco declared, finally sitting down and digging into the spread set before them. “Don’t eat too much, Drac. Don’t want to make your head any bigger than it already

is.” Harry quipped, smirking when Draco snapped him a glare in response.

“It couldn’t possibly become as big as *yours*, Potter.” He replied, rolling his eyes before he began digging into his dinner.

Harry smirked but didn’t reply as he helped himself to some smoked salmon, watching as he saw a lot of other teenagers their age who didn’t seem to be attending Hogwarts.

“Say, Draco... Who are all these other people and how come I don’t recognize any of them?” Harry asked curiously, easily eating his dinner with the same manners as the other aristocrats at their table.

Draco followed his gaze before answering, turning his attention back to his food. “You wouldn’t. Most of them are my distant cousins—they attend different schools all around England. Some of them are even home-schooled from what I last heard. Something about being too pureblood to mingle with normal students.” He explained, shrugging.

AJ made a look of disgust beside him which Draco failed to see.

“And the other non-Slytherin Hogwartians you’ve invited?” Harry asked, quirking an eyebrow as he eyed the various familiar faces he saw gathered around the Malfoy ballroom— *Nathaniel Townsend*, *Lisa Turpin*, *Cho Chang*, *Mandy Brocklehurst* and a lot of others Harry couldn’t make out. All, he noted, were from Ravenclaw.

“Oh... They’re the other pureblooded families that Mother and Father invited. Back then, Father was always encouraging me to mingle with these people before going entering Hogwarts. I guess I didn’t need to, huh?” He smirked, shrugging.

Harry smirked back but didn’t answer him, merely watching in mild interest when Cho caught his eye very briefly in the corner of the room, blushing slightly before hastily turning away.

Cedric’s old girlfriend... Harry thought to himself, raising a curious eyebrow as the girl continued talking to her friends, ignoring his presence from then on. Shaking his head, he chose not to

acknowledge her any further and instead, turned to Draco, who by now was eyeing the large stack of presents at the far end of the room.

“Oh yeah. Be sure to clean *my* present every once in a while with dragon blood, will you? It’s to be properly taken care of.” Harry drawled, smirking when Draco turned to give him a surprised look, excitement flashing in his eyes.

“You didn’t?”

“I did.” Harry responded easily, rolling his eyes when Draco pushed his chair back and headed for the gift table, managing to give him a brief grin of gratitude before digging through the large pile of boxes.

AJ laughed and shook her head, turning to look at Harry. “What did you get him, Harry?” She asked, looking curious. Harry shrugged, leaving off most of the details. “Nothing special. Just a dagger really. I found it in one of those antique shops.” He lied, refusing to meet her gaze.

His sister looked like she was going to ask another question but before she could however, a voice had spoken from behind them, causing both Slytherins to turn around. Immediately, Harry sneered, narrowing his eyes.

“Townsend.” He drawled coldly, his voice cool and unforgiving.

The black-haired Ravenclaw shifted slightly, looking uncomfortable under Harry’s dark gaze. “Potter. Good to see you again.” He offered, giving Harry a hesitant smile.

When the Slytherin didn’t smile back, Nathaniel’s blue eyes darted nervously to AJ who, in contrast, gave him a warm smile. “Actually... I just came over here to ask AJ for a dance... If she wouldn’t mind...” He started softly, his eyes moving back and forth between the twins.

Harry was about to open his mouth to respond but AJ gave him a glare, shaking her head. “I’d love to dance, Nathaniel.” She said, smiling as she carefully set her glass down and took his hand, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor.

As soon as they were out of her brother's earshot, Nathaniel breathed a huge sigh of relief, laughing at himself. "Phew. Excuse me while I catch my breath, I didn't think I'd actually live through that one." He kidded, managing a sheepish grin.

AJ giggled, flashing him an understanding gaze. "I completely understand. I know Harry can be a bit intimidating sometimes." She apologized just as an upbeat tune started to play, causing Nathaniel to twirl her gracefully around.

"It's perfectly alright. I understand how he feels. I have a younger sister...She's about 10 now, I'd expect. I'm terribly protective of her too." He quipped, giving her a roguish smile.

AJ shifted slightly uncomfortable under his scrutiny but looked at him in interest. "You have a sister?" She asked.

Nathaniel smiled warmly, his bright blue eyes sparkling. "She enters Hogwarts next year. After I graduate. She's a really cute bugger, she is. Always crying and clinging to me right before I get on the Hogwarts express. I miss her all the time." He told her, gentleness in his voice.

AJ smiled at the affectionate look she saw in his eyes. "You must love her very much then. What's her name?" She asked.

"Marissa. She's this bouncy, beautiful little girl with black hair and blue eyes just like mine. Perhaps you'll meet her when she enters Hogwarts. Maybe you could even take care of her for me." Nathaniel replied, grinning when AJ stuck out her tongue at him.

"I can't do that. I don't even know you that well. All I know about you is that you're in running to be the Head Boy this year." AJ replied, wrinkling her nose when Nathaniel bowed his head in guilt.

"Guilty as charged. My full name's Nathaniel Alexander Townsend. My friends call me Nathan for short. And yes, I am a pureblood wizard should you ask that next." He answered for her, laughing when AJ burned bright red in embarrassment.

"N-no! I wasn't going to ask you that. I d-don't mind really whether you're a pureblood or not! I—"

"Relax, Amanda. I know. I was just playing with you. I wouldn't have been invited here if I wasn't a pureblood, knowing the snob Malfoy is." He told her as he spun her again, failing to see the blush on her face.

"*I'm* not a pureblooded wizard." She told him, causing him to blink in surprise. Then he nodded, comprehension dawning in his eyes. "Right. I remember. Lily Evans was a muggleborn witch. That would make you a half-blood then, wouldn't it?" He asked her and she nodded, looking uncomfortable.

Nathan shook his head, stopping their dance for a second. "Don't worry about it. Most of the Wizarding families these days aren't pureblood anymore. You-Know-Who himself was a half-blood. It doesn't mean anything. It certainly doesn't matter to *me*. I was really just kidding around." He assured her, offering a friendly smile.

AJ nodded, laughing lightly to clear the mood before she allowed him to steer her into another graceful dance. "You're a wonderful dancer, Nathan. I suppose pureblooded families train you for that since birth?" She teased.

Nathan laughed good-naturedly, shaking his head. "No, I believe that would be just me and my wonderful aptitude to keep on my feet." He kidded. "You're not a bad dancer yourself, Amanda." He told her, causing the Slytherin to wince.

"Call me AJ, Nathan." She told him, causing the Ravenclaw to smile and nod in agreement. "So... Nathan... Your father is...?"

"Edmund Townsend. He works for the ministry... Department of Magical Law if I'm not mistaken. He's also the owner of the *Daily Prophet*." He explained, his voice devoid of any conceitedness. "Have you heard of him?" He asked her curiously, pretending not to notice the look of surprise on her face.

"I may have... Though I must say, I'm a bit intimidated now." She quipped, her eyes wide. Nathaniel rolled his eyes and spun her around again, pulling her back gently to him. "Don't be. It's not as

great as it sounds. Things always sound so much greater when you tell other people.” He told her.

AJ nodded, considering him carefully. Why had she never bothered talking to Nathaniel before? He was such a friendly guy, they would surely have been friends. All she knew about him then was then he was incredibly smart and very friendly. Of course she had been a bitch back then so she wouldn’t have bothered to become friends him.

That probably explains it. AJ thought to herself, feeling foolish. If only she hadn’t been so conceited back then, she probably would have made lots of friends not only in Ravenclaw but also from the other houses. It killed her to realize that she had wasted more than half of her years in Hogwarts being a complete moron.

“So... What did you think of Malfoy’s speech awhile ago? Pompous little prick isn’t he?” Nathan kidded, looking surprised when AJ suddenly blushed in embarrassment, laughing to herself.

“Have I said something wrong?” He asked in concern as AJ bit her lip, trying to phrase her words carefully.

“Yes, he is. Although I can’t say that without it backfiring on me, actually. I’m his girlfriend.” She answered him, laughing nervously and watching his features.

Nathaniel paled slightly in shock, taking a small step back. “O-oh... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know... I... I didn’t know or I never would have asked another person’s girlfriend to dance with me. I’m so terribly sorry, it was very inconsiderate of me.” He apologized earnestly, nervously running a hand through his mane of black hair.

AJ shook her head, smiling to appease his guilt. “It’s quite alright, Nathan. It doesn’t mean anything. You were simply trying to strike up a friendly conversation. It was much appreciated.” She told him, causing him to sigh in relief.

“I’m so sorry. I really am. I don’t want to send you the wrong idea that I’d be flirting with you even though you had a boyfriend. I’m not that kind of person. Forgive me, perhaps I’ll take you back to your brother.” He offered, looking slightly guilty.

AJ opened her mouth to respond to his comment about flirting when she felt a firm but gentle hand gripped her arm from behind.

"That won't be necessary, Townsend. I'll take her next dance." Came Draco's cool voice, causing the Ravenclaw to look up in surprise.

"O-of course. She's all yours, Malfoy." He agreed warmly, bowing his head in farewell and giving them both a smile before he excused himself, his gaze lingering on AJ for a brief second with a twinge of disappointment.

AJ took no more notice of Nathaniel for the rest of the night however as she felt Draco's arms wrap around her waist, pulling her close to his firm body. "Hey... What were you doing flirting with someone else behind my back?" He whispered teasingly in her ear, a slight twinge of malice in his voice.

"I wasn't flirting, Draco. You *know* I'm yours. Body *and* soul." She told him, smiling when she saw the Slytherin's eyes cloud over in desire.

"Yes. You are." He murmured, leaning over to brush his lips very fleetingly on hers, causing her breath to hitch in her throat. She sighed contentedly as he pulled away and snuggled into his chest, the music around them slowing into a romantic melody.

Draco let his hands travel up and down her back, the other hand gently playing with the silky strands of her hair. "Mmmm. You're beautiful... You know that?" He spoke softly, leaning over to drop a kiss onto her forehead.

AJ didn't respond, closing her eyes as she savored the feeling of their bodies swaying gently with the beat of the music, her head resting on his chest.

"I missed you." Draco told her, moving one hand to caress a soft cheek before he pulled back slightly so he could look into her eyes. "I missed these lips." He continued, flashing a sexy smirk before he traced them with his finger, his eyes following the path he traced out.

AJ closed her eyes as Draco slowly bent to meet her lips in a searing kiss, his hands snaking around her waist to pull her against him. She

felt it again. The familiar burning in her chest... The fire that had erupted all over her body.

Only Draco could make her feel this way— could make her heart beat so fast in a single instant with the slightest touch or word. Only Draco could make her feel like her body and her soul were one... And that everywhere he touched her, she felt his own soul reaching out to hers. Imploring her. Wanting her.

She lost all sense of thought altogether when she felt his tongue teasing her lips gently, humbly seeking entrance which she instantly obliged, causing them both to moan softly. Soon, she found herself teasing his tongue with her own, although a bit uncertainly, unsure of what to do.

Draco smiled into the kiss and pulled away slowly, watching her as she blinked her eyes open, looking at him in confusion.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to stop there, duchess.” He told her, his cheeks tinged with pink and looking slightly out of breath.

AJ looked forlorn, her eyes dropping to the floor. “Is it me...? I... I’ve never done this before.” She started but Draco shook his head, putting a finger to her lips.

“No, AJ. I meant...” Draco laughed softly, trying to explain. “I want to do more... I’m just afraid I won’t be able to control myself if I went any further with you.” He explained, his eyes laden with passion as he stared into her eyes.

AJ blushed but understood, nodding. Before she lost her nerve, however, she stepped up to him and put her arms around his neck, pulling him in towards her lips. Draco’s eyes widened in surprise but he didn’t protest when AJ caught his lips again, this time initiating the kiss herself, exploring his mouth timidly with her own tongue.

Draco melted at the innocence of the action, gently caressing her face when she pulled away, looking slightly scared but sure of what she was about to do.

“I’m yours, Draco.” She told him softly, her eyes focused intently on his own silver orbs.

Draco blinked in confusion.

“I know, AJ. What—”

“No. I mean—” She looked around uncertainly, unsure of what to tell him.

“C-can we go somewhere more private? I... I-I have to talk to you about something.” She told him, looking intently at him.

Draco nodded, not fully understanding. Looking at Blaise and slightly signaling he was going to go upstairs, the other boy nodded, returning to converse with his friends. Before anyone else could interrupt them, Draco quickly led AJ out of the ballroom into the quiet foyer, where the girl looked around nervously.

“Umm... Can we maybe talk in your room? Where it’s more private?” She asked him, biting her lip. Draco raised another curious eyebrow but obliged, taking her hand and guiding her up the stairs to the second floor. After leading her through a mess of hallways, they came upon Draco’s large bedroom at the end of the hall.

Closing one of the large double doors, he finally sat her down on the large four-poster bed, raising his eyebrows. “Alright. What’s up, AJ? Something wrong?” Draco asked in concern, kneeling in front of her.

AJ shook her head but didn’t answer him, still blushing as she looked around the enormous room. The room was decorated in a peaceful shade of green and white with beautiful carpets and carefully painted walls.

A large window was in the center of the room, adorned with beautiful pale green curtains while a large full-length mirror stood in the corner of the room, gleaming from where she sat.

This is it. No turning back now. She told herself, finally turning to face him.

She stared at him for a long moment, taking in his handsome features which at the moment were creased in concern. Reaching over, she unclasped *Fierros*— the pendant she had given him in their fourth year—from his neck, setting it down on the bedside table.

“AJ?”

AJ gave him a nervous but gentle smile, rising from the bed and pulling him up to his feet. “Draco... I... I *want* to be yours.” She told him, squeezing his hand slightly. Draco still looked a bit confused, giving her a hesitant smile. “You are, love. Completely. As I am to you.” He assured her, kissing her hand.

“No, Draco. I want to be yours...Body*and* soul.” She told him, her face completely red now as the meaning of her words finally sunk in on Draco’s face and he looked at her in captivated surprise, his silver eyes smoldering in desire.

He swallowed nervously, his hand tightening around hers. “I see.” He replied, gently caressing her face as he gave her a small smile, utterly enamored with her courage and beauty.

Walking over to the window, he slowly released the curtains to cover them. Then, trying his best to keep from saying anything that might frighten her, he turned towards the door, using his wand to mutter a series of locking charms to make sure they weren’t disturbed. He kept his back turned to her for a long moment before he turned to face her, his eyes grim but his smile elated.

“Are you sure?”

He watched her swallow nervously as he walked up to her, keeping himself from touching her lest she run away.

AJ nodded, her decision clear as she raised a hand and slowly began to unbutton her robe, trembling as she felt Draco’s hungry, intense gaze follow her hand down every button she unclasped.

Then, her heart pounding rapidly in her chest, the last button came off and the elegant material slid gracefully to the marble floor.

I can't believe I'm not enjoying myself.

Harry thought irritably as he downed another shot of vodka, slamming the shot glass back on the table before he turned to survey the ballroom before him.

He noticed that most of the adults had gone into the other room and that he was surrounded by a crowd of Slytherins and Ravenclaws, all of whom were either on the dance floor or by the table of unlimited alcoholic drinks. He smirked when he noticed Blaise Zabini with a group of blonde female cousins of Draco's, all of which seemed to be listening intently to his story.

He had hoped that by coming here tonight that he would have at least forgotten about the events that had prior to the upcoming school year. He didn't however, and if anything he was only completely irritated when people asked him about Cedric every now and then.

Most of the Slytherins hadn't asked him about the tournament although a part of him was unnerved by what Lucius had warned him about his friends. He *had* to discover their loyalties sooner or later. There was a war coming up... And Harry himself didn't know which side he was on—Dumbledore's or Voldemort's.

More than anything, he wanted to be a part of another side. *His* side. And he would be needing loyal followers should he choose to establish that. Draco and Blaise wouldn't be enough. He needed the support of other people as well... People who would train with him in the oldest forms of magic. The oldest forms of the dark arts.

The Forbidden Arts.

He would train them to be his league. And together, they would vanquish Voldemort, using the best means they knew how—through fighting back. And after they did, they would establish their own rules in the Wizarding World...Rules that would reestablish the proper place of wizards in society. Rules that idiots like Albus Dumbledore had broken when he had influenced others with his ideas.

Yes, a war was coming soon. And he would be trapped right in the middle of soon. He wasn't going to be caught unprepared. He and Draco would begin their training with Lucius soon... And perhaps Snape.

Harry was soon interrupted by his thoughts however when he heard a soft chuckle in front of him, causing him to look up into the smiling face of his ex-girlfriend Cho Chang who had obviously seated herself across the table.

"Sickle for your thoughts, Harry?" She asked lightly, raising a curious eyebrow just before Harry helped himself to another drink, blatantly ignoring her.

"Galleon for your leave, Chang?" He countered blandly, downing the shot in one gulp before turning to face her with a guarded sneer, unsure of how to go about talking to the girlfriend of the guy everyone accused him of killing.

Cho bit her lip uncertainly, looking embarrassed.

"I-I'm not here to blame you or ask you anything about Cedric's...death... Harry. I really just wanted to talk to a familiar face in the crowd... There's not a lot of people I really know here." She admitted, her bright eyes dropping to the floor.

Harry raised an eyebrow but didn't respond, still unsure of what to say.

"Alright...How you holding up then, Chang? Still think I'm the biggest asshole to grace this planet?" He asked bluntly, causing the girl to give a short laugh, hastily shaking her head.

"N-no... Harry. Actually...I think it wrong for all those people to blame you for what happened. If anything, I wanted to thank you...You brought Cedric's body back... That was very brave of you." She spoke softly, blushing in embarrassment.

Harry kept his eyes trained on her, inspecting her face suspiciously for any signs of malice. Strangely, he found none.

“How kind of you. Tell me, *Cho*, what is this really about? Why are you here? You haven’t talked to me since I dumped you in third year.” He replied harshly, narrowing his eyes dangerously at her as she began fiddling with her hands.

“H-Harry...Please. I—I... I mean you no form of malice whatsoever. I just wanted to be with someone tonight... I’ve been so terrified lately. Especially after what happened to Cedric. I’ve been feeling so vulnerable...so alone...” She began blurting out, struggling to choose her words carefully.

Harry didn’t respond, his emerald green eyes lifeless as he watched her talk over his newly filled glass of vodka.

“W-well... You’re powerful, Harry. You’re so strong...And you’re not afraid of the Dark Lord at all...Somehow I just feel so safe being in the same room with you.” Cho spoke softly, placing her pale hand gently above Harry’s arm and squeezing slightly, causing the Slytherin to stiffen in alarm.

“Excuse me...?”

He didn’t pull back but his eyes dared her to explain further, warning her to choose her words carefully lest she suffer his wrath of anger.

“Please...If you’ll dance with me just once, I’ll—”

“I believe that’s not possible.” Came Harry’s cold reply as he stood up and shrugged her hand off his arm, downing the rest of his drink in one gulp before walking brusquely to the far corner of the room towards his friends.

“Harry, please! Wait!”

He heard Cho struggling to chase after him from behind but he didn’t look back, his green eyes search the room hastily for any sign of Draco.

Damn it.

“Harry!”

Gritting his teeth, he turned around, his robes swishing dramatically behind him as he gave the Ravenclaw a patient leer, his eyes flashing dangerously.

“Forgive me for being rude, Chang but have you *no* friends here tonight that you must *insist* on following me for the rest of the party?” He asked her, smirking when the girl reddened in humiliation.

“No, Harry. Please, don’t think I’m sending the wrong impression or anything. But please...Can you at least give me one dance?” She asked him gently, her eyes pleading in a way so similar to Hermione that Harry sighed and gave in, allowing her to pull him onto the dance floor.

One dance couldn’t hurt...It’s not like I’m cheating on Hermione or anything. It’ll be fine. He thought to himself as he held the other girl in his arms, tensing slightly when Cho closed her eyes and rested her cheek against his shoulder.

Damn it. This girl has serious issues. Harry thought as he felt her sigh and melt contentedly in his arms, her own arms sneaking to wrap around his neck.

Then, almost as if he couldn’t help it, he snaked his arms around the girl’s slim waist, smirking slightly to himself.

What the hell... I might as well. No harm done in dancing. The girl is beautiful anyway. He thought, sneering appreciatively as he raked his eyes over Cho’s feminine curves as her body was pressed up against him.

“You know, Chang...This *is* a bit of a comfortable position.” He found himself drawling casually, causing the girl to giggle slightly against his shoulder, tightening her arms around him.

“Isn’t it though? Oh, Harry... I wonder what ever went wrong in our relationship.... We made such a great couple back then. We make one now.” She told him, looking up at him expectantly with batted eyelashes.

Harry raised an appreciative eyebrow, taking in the sultry tone in the Ravenclaw's voice.

"Yes we did, didn't we? You were a regular she-devil in disguise, Chang. You had me addicted to you for more than two weeks." He pointed out, flashing her a flirtatious grin.

Cho laughed again, blushing prettily as she seemed to visibly relax at Harry's shift of attitude, allowing herself to blend in more casually with the music.

"Well I had to keep you hooked *somehow*, didn't I? You were a catch in yourself, altogether. What ever happened to us, anyway? I forget." She wondered out loud, fusing her eyebrows together.

Harry's grin turned into a malicious sneer, his eyes glinting. "I cheated on you with your best friend." He replied, his tone rather sarcastic.

All the color in Cho's face drained out, causing the girl to pale drastically at the mention of the memory.

"R-right...I r-remember now." She stammered, nervously missing a step in their dance.

With that, Harry finally snapped back to his senses and smirked, letting go of her. His face immediately set itself into a cold mask as quickly as it had fallen.

"See that you do. I'm not your knight in shining armor, Chang. Far from it. What's done is done." He concluded with a note of finality, causing Cho to step back, affronted as Harry gave her one last mocking bow, a sardonic smile on his face.

"Thank you for the dance, mademoiselle." He drawled lazily, planting a derisive kiss on the back of her hand before turning and walking over to the group of Slytherin boys by the liquor table, leaving Cho Chang gaping at him from the dance floor. Watching him leave, Cho narrowed her eyes, a strangely determined expression on her face Harry failed to see.

Approaching Theodore Nott from behind, he clapped the other Slytherin boy from the back, helping himself to a drink table beside him.

Theodore turned lazy eyes towards him, raising his own glass of champagne in greeting.

"Potter. How are you this evening? Without the amiable Miss Granger, I see." He commented, giving him a smirk which Harry returned a cold look,

"You know very well I can't bring Hermione here. Not with all that's been happening lately. I just don't want her to get hurt." He snapped angrily, gulping down another shot of what he tasted to be brandy.

"I suppose that would be the reason you found yourself in the charming company of your former girlfriend a couple of seconds ago...?" Theodore asked lightly, giving the boy an amused leer.

Harry reddened in anger, his eyes narrowing in threat.

"I hope you also observed the fact that I *left* the slut on the dance floor when she started coming on to me. You'll find I'm way past that stage of my life, Nott." Harry said, setting his empty glass back down on the table.

"Are you really, Harry? I hardly think so. You may care deeply for your beloved Gryffindor but have you really changed yet? Life changes, after all, do not happen within a year." Theodore drawled casually, giving Harry a calm look of scrutiny.

"*That* is none of your business, Nott." Came Harry's flat reply as he hastily drank another shot of vodka once more, swaying slightly on the spot.

Theo observed this silently, raising an eyebrow in slight amusement. "If you're trying to drown yourself in liquor, Potter. I suggest you do it anywhere but near me. I do not want to be the one responsible for your welfare." He pointed out, gesturing to the next drink Harry was already claiming for himself.

The other boy snorted derisively, rolling his eyes.

“Relax, Nott. I’m fine. I can hold my liquor. It’s Flint over there you should be concerned about.” He pointed out, smirking at the former Slytherin in question walking unsteadily across the room.

“Well, Flint was always that uncultivated even then. That comes of no surprise.” Theodore replied easily in agreement, taking a languid sip of his drink.

Harry smirked his assent but took Theodore’s advice and began to down his sip more carefully, not wanting to get drunk during his best friend’s party.

Speaking of his best friend... Harry looked around the large ballroom once again, his eyes sweeping past the drunken Slytherins and gala of teenage purebloods.

“Where *is* Draco?”

Theodore scanned the room silently, smirking when he saw no sign of the blonde Slytherin in question.

“I believe I saw him dancing with your sister awhile ago. Perhaps they’ve gone off to indulge themselves in more...private matters.” Theodore offered, much to Harry’s chagrin as he cursed loudly in anger.

“That bastard, I’ll kill him if he touches my sister.” He muttered darkly as he made to find him, only to have Theodore hold him back slightly with a single arm.

“Potter. It’s Draco’s birthday. He and your sister are in love...Much like you are with Granger. Let them be. I’m sure AJ is mature enough to take care of herself.” He reminded him, causing Harry to think about his words.

After a tense moment, he sighed and snatched the drink Theodore had in his hand, downing it in one nervous gulp.

“Damn it...It’s just...*weird*...Imagining your best friend and your sister together. I know I’ve given them my blessing but it’s still weird as hell.” He thought, shaking his head as he tried to control his anger.

“Well get used to it. There’s really not much you can do about it now.” The other Slytherin replied, reaching for another glass of champagne as Harry had discarded his empty old one.

“Yeah right. Merlin, I *hate* this! No offense to Draco but I’m bored out of my mind. I need to find something to do.” Harry muttered darkly, raking a hand through his dark hair as he scanned the room.

Theodore chuckled slightly, shaking his head.

“You should have brought Granger, Potter. That way, you wouldn’t find yourself alone while all of us seek lovely female companionship.” He stated simply, causing Harry to blink and ponder his thoughts.

“You know, Nott...You may *just* have a point there.” Smirking, he nodded his leave to the other Slytherin and headed towards the exit of the ballroom towards the main hallway, searching for any of the Malfoy house elves.

He eventually found him cleaning the fireplace in the master living room and walked over to the unsuspecting creature, raising an eyebrow as he pondered what to say.

“Er...Elf?”

The house elf squeaked in surprise and promptly dropped the dustpan it was holding, sending clouds of dust into the air and eventually covering itself *and* the fireplace in soot.

Harry rolled his eyes, shaking his head before he crouched over and lifted the elf to its feet, helping it dust itself.

“I don’t mean to intrude...I was just wondering...Is this were you keep the special floo powder?” Harry asked, gesturing to the small pot of green powder on top of the large fireplace.

The elf squeaked again and nodded, looking slightly nervous.

"Indeed, young master, sir. But Master Lucius warned me specifically *not* to let anyone use it without his permission!" The elf protested in a feminine voice, shaking its head profusely.

Harry looked around the empty living room before leaning over to whisper something to the elf.

"Listen...How about this...? I won't tell Lucius anything about you dirtying up the fireplace again if you let me have just a small pouch of this stuff. It'll be our little secret...er..."

"Missy, sir Harry."

"Right. Missy, then. Here...I'll even throw in this...er..." Harry fumbled around in his pocket for something to give the wide-eyed elf.

"Silk green handkerchief...? Er...I'm not dismissing you or anything since I'm not your real master...But you'll find that this is particularly useful in cleaning a lot of stuff...I know an elf Dobby who uses this to clean up himself when he's dirty. You could use it on yourself right now." He told her, feeling a bit stupid as he heard himself speaking the words.

The house-elf stared at the expensive handkerchief with wide eyes filled with wonder, obviously tempted by the Slytherin's offer. "Y-young master will return quickly, y-yes?" She asked him nervously, her voice dropping to a hushed, squeaky whisper.

Harry gave a triumphant smirk, nodding and holding the handkerchief out to her. "I'll be back before you know it. Lucius *or* Draco would never suspect a thing." He told her, dangling the handkerchief above her head.

Finally, she squeaked and reached for it, looking around nervously. "Young master can use the fireplace while no one is around. I'll keep watch outside to make sure no one sees him." She promised him and she ran off, happily tucking the handkerchief into her pillowcase-robe.

Harry chuckled under his breath, shaking his head at the house-elf's gullibility before he turned to the large fireplace in front of him, trying to remember the address of where he intended to go.

What was the street again? Applewood? Applecreek? Argh...I could end up lost in the muggle world if I don't remember correctly. He thought irritably.

Apherwoods? Right! Apherwoods...Well here goes nothing... He thought, grabbing a handful of green powder and tucking most into a small pouch he had procured from his pocket. With that he dropped the remaining in his hands onto the fireplace in front of him, stepping into the now green fire.

“ 14 Apherwoods Drive!”

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she carefully turned a page of the book she was reading, repeating the spell she was trying to learn in her mind.

She lay on her stomach on the large four poster bed in her room, pouring over a new spell book her parents had bought for her to read in advance before the school year started. Downstairs, she could hear the loud music from the muggle television set along with her father's occasional laughter.

She stopped for moment, her obsessive compulsiveness causing her to hastily adjust the position of the clock on her beside table before turning to the book again, tucking a strand of straight brown hair behind her ear.

Expecto Patronum...

“Expecto Patronum...Expecto...Patronum...” She muttered under her breath, her eyes scanning the magical diagram as she reached for a pencil beside her, using the object to simulate the spell's wand movement.

This spell is a bit difficult... She thought, her eyebrows now furrowing in concentration as she turned her head towards the window as a reference point, holding the muggle pencil in her hand.

“Expecto Patronum!” She said out loud, flicking her pencil in accordance to the diagram laid out in front of her. With that, she

smiled to herself in satisfaction, closing the book in front of her quietly and sitting herself up.

Well that's that. I better go see what Dad's watching. She thought, walking over to her dresser and hastily tying her long brown hair into a ponytail, several strands left to frame her delicate face.

Just as she was walking towards the door, however, she jumped in surprise when she heard a light tap on her window, causing her to whirl around in suspicion.

“What in the world—?” She thought out loud as she walked back slowly towards the direction of the sound, straining to hear above the noise of the television for the sound again.

Both eyebrows raised in confusion and slight trepidation, she slowly unbound the curtains that covered the small glass window of her room, keeping a safe distance from it in case she heard the sound again.

She jumped back in alarm, however, when she saw a small pebble crash lightly against the glass, causing another loud tap to echo in her room. Curious, she opened the window and leaned over to the view of the front lawn outside their house only to have her eyes widen in surprise and her heart jump into her throat.

There, almost contrasting humorously against their muggle lawn, stood the ice prince himself—Harry James Potter—looking up at her window with a slightly mischievous grin on his handsome face.

Feeling her heart beating rapidly, she had the insane urge to giggle as she saw him glancing around the muggle neighborhood nervously before looking up at her again, this time offering a breathtaking smile.

Hermione finally blinked and snapped back to her senses, the happy glow in her brown eyes immediately replaced by a look of scandal and nervousness.

“Harry!” She snapped, causing the Slytherin’s eyes to widen as he held a finger against his lips, indicating for her to be silent lest the

muggle neighbors notice a robed, conspicuous-looking teenage boy standing out in their lawn.

Hermione bit her tongue sheepishly, turning slightly red before she spoke again, this time her voice lowering to a mere hiss of anger.

“Harry James Potter, what on *earth* do you think you’re doing here? Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you to be *here*?” She admonished, opening the other side of the window, hastily readjusting her night robe as she leaned over to get a better glimpse of her Slytherin boyfriend.

She had never seen anybody look so out of place in a muggle environment as Harry did right now. He was wearing dress robes in his favorite shade of emerald green over a stylish gray collared shirt and fitted black slacks which accentuated his firmly toned form nicely. His hair had been gelled into impish spikes while the single earring on his left ear glinted in the dark night, along with the playful gleam in his green eyes.

He looked like a mischievous prince who had stepped right out of a muggle fairytale books right into their front lawn. He took Hermione’s breath away.

“I wanted to see you, Granger. Or are you not happy to see me?” He teased back lightly, casually leaning over the mermaid fountain her father had situated in the middle of the grass field.

“Oh please, Potter. Tossing pebbles up at my window at night...? Is this how pathetic you’ve become?” She teased back easily, mirroring his smirk with her own, playing with the serpent pendant Harry had given her around her neck.

He laughed lightly, his eyes sparkling to life for the first time that summer as he stood back up and indicated to their lawn, looking a bit sheepish.

“Actually...You don’t know *exactly* how pathetic I’ve become, thanks to you, Gryffindor. I forgot the muggle address you had written on your letters...I blurted out Apherwoods instead of *Apherwood*.” He admitted, raking a hand through his hair in embarrassment.

He looked so boyishly endearing that way that Hermione had to giggle, shaking her head.

“Yeah...Well...As it would turn out, Apherwoods is another street about five blocks away from your house. I ended up right in the fireplace of a muggle family having dinner. Luckily, only the little kid saw me and pointed me out as a ‘fireman’. I stormed out of there before the parents could turn around and get a good look at my face. I walked the rest of the way here.” He continued, now blushing slightly as he rubbed the back of his head.

Hermione melted at the thought of the Slytherin walking five blocks in a muggle neighborhood just to visit her, knowing Harry was unaware that he could be the sweetest boyfriend when he wanted to be.

“But...How did you get here? Aren’t you supposed to be at Draco’s birthday party?” She asked him again, looking slightly concerned.

He nodded, grinning and holding up a small pouch from his pocket.

“I was there. I got here by floo powder...I wanted to see you, ‘Mione. I feel terrible for not being able to bring you along tonight...So I figured I’d spend the rest of my night here with you than getting myself drunk with all those snobby purebloods. It was terrible being there with all those people knowing that the one person I’ve been aching for all summer wasn’t.” He drawled simply.

Though his voice had been devoid of any emotion and he had spoken simply to respond to her query, the obvious tone in his voice sent shivers down her spine.

She gave him a beautiful smile, a playful sparkle in her eyes.

“Aren’t you charming, Potter? Why don’t you just tell me the liquor sucked?” She retorted affectionately, causing the Slytherin to smirk in response, raising a sexy eyebrow.

“Alright. You caught me. Nothing gets past you.” He agreed jokingly, ducking with a laugh when Hermione growled and hurled a ball of paper at him.

"I'm kidding! I'm kidding, Granger. Now come on...Are you going to let me up or not? I'm freezing down here." He whined, his features scrunching up in complaint. Hermione rolled her eyes but smiled and gestured to the trellis leading up her window, giving him a smirk.

"You wanted to do this the muggle way, Potter? Climb up the trellis to get in. I can't let you in through the front door, my parents will kill me for bringing home a guy." She whispered, looking around nervously.

At that, Harry couldn't help but smirk roguishly, raising a single eyebrow. "Then I reckon they shouldn't know about some of the other things you've been doing, Miss Granger." He drawled, causing Hermione to shoot him a death glare.

"Hush. Now, hurry up. Climb already before someone sees you!" She hissed at him, gesturing him towards the trellis.

"How romantic." Harry replied sarcastically before he clambered over towards the wall, hoisting a strong leg up onto the unsteady trellis for support.

"Are you *sure* this thing will hold?" He asked nervously, testing his weight against the brittle wood.

"It's not like you weigh a hundred pounds, Potter. Now hurry up!" Hermione urged, her heart beating nervously as she kept a steady look on the front door in case her parents caught them.

"Hey, I resent that. You think I'm just a scrawny git, don't you?" He huffed indignantly, hoisting another leg up easily towards a higher step, keeping a firm hold on the railings for support.

Hermione was about to retort when she heard her mom's voice behind her, followed by a knock on her bedroom door.

"Hermione, dear? Are you in there? Who are you talking to?"

Hermione gasped and rushed over towards the door, locking it before her mother could walk in and notice the Slytherin ambling up towards her window.

"I'm fine, Mom! I-I was just...practicing some spells for school. I wasn't talking to anyone!" She called back nervously, ignoring Harry's pointed snickers from under her window.

"Are you sure...? It sounded like you were talking in there." Her mother replied suspiciously, knocking on the door once more.

"I'm perfectly sure, Mom. You and Dad go on back downstairs." She reassured her, laughing nervously. There was a slight pause before she heard her mother step away from her door.

"Alright then, dear. Just making sure." She replied kindly before Hermione soon heard the sound of her footsteps fading, causing her to breath a sigh of relief.

She was about to turn back to the window to help Harry up and she jumped back, muffling a gasp of surprise as she came face to face with the fluffy face of her stuffed Gryffindor lion, which Harry had held up against his face in front of her.

"Grawr?" He teased lightly, a seductive smirk on his face as he slowly lowered the stuffed toy, allowing Hermione to see the desire evident in his features. She swallowed nervously, grabbing the lion from his grasp and setting it back down onto the bed.

"That was fast. I didn't hear you climb in." She said hastily, managing a laugh as she sat back down on the edge of her neatly made bed, looking up at Harry in silence.

She felt another insane urge to laugh as she pondered their current situation. If anybody had told her one year ago that *Harry Potter*, of all people, would be in her room, she would have sent that person straight to St. Mungo's. She found the situation all to amusing.

Harry wasn't listening to her however as he looked around her room in keen interest, his bright green eyes inspecting its feminine neatness. He blinked as he took in the pink and white shades and unscrupulous organization, smirking when he saw the rather massive shelf of books in the corner.

“So...This is your room...” He wondered out loud, walking over to a nearby trunk and opening it invasively, causing Hermione to exclaim as he came upon her undergarments.

Harry grinned as Hermione shoved him away from the chest, hastily closing it and locking with a huge muggle padlock.

“Pervert!” She hissed angrily at him, making to slap him lightly but Harry caught her hand and used it to pull her against him, wrapping both of his own around her waist.

“You’re right. I’m not interested in *those*, Granger. I’m more interested in the ones you have on.” He purred into her ear, sending shivers down Hermione’s spine as he pressed their bodies together, his hand pushing her bangs away to reveal her glowing brown eyes.

They stared at each other for a long moment, trying to memorize each other’s facial features as Harry stroked her cheek tenderly, his eyes taking in every inch of her beauty.

“Hermione...I’ve missed you..” He whispered against her ear, his voice husky as his hands began roaming over the curves of her body, causing the Gryffindor to close her eyes at the wonderful sensation of feeling his hands on her again.

“I-I’ve missed you too, Harry.” She replied, her voice shaking as Harry carefully unclasped the knot of her robe, causing the material to loosen and expose her sheer baby doll nightgown, leaving her skin exposed to his incessant hands.

“Mmmm...God, Hermione... you’re even sexier than the last time I saw you. I don’t know how you do that.” He murmured appreciatively, leaning over to nuzzle her neck, inhaling in her sweet scent as Hermione trailed her hands over the firm muscles on his back and arms.

She nuzzled his neck in response, running eager fingers through his hair as Harry finally pressed her lips against hers, one hand forcefully tightening around her waist and pressing her slender body firmly against his powerful one.

She moaned softly into the kiss, her head spinning wildly as she felt the Slytherin kiss her ravenously, his movements fueled with heavy passion as he began pushing her back towards the bed, his lips never leaving hers.

Before she had any time to react, he had pushed her roughly onto the soft mattress, immediately pinning her to the bed with his own body just as Hermione felt his tongue teasing her lips, seeking entrance.

She obliged immediately, opening her mouth to the sweet invasion of his tongue and moaning when she felt the wonderful sensation of his smooth hands moving underneath her nightgown, caressing her exposed skin.

Timidly, she met his tongue with her own, initiating a feeble battle for dominance which she, of course, lost to him, allowing him to explore every crevice of her mouth forcefully as she weakly tried to do the same with him.

Harry felt a surge of desire at the innocence of her seduction, reveling in the sweet taste of her mouth, the sound of her soft sighs and moans at his administrations driving him crazy with lust.

“Harry...” She whispered against their intertwined lips, pulling him closer against her until she felt his arousal through their pressed bodies, causing her to blush in both fervor and embarrassment.

At this, Harry smirked through heavy lidded eyes, shaking his head playfully. “You tease.” He whispered, catching her lips once more as his hands finally slipped under her bra and cupped the ample mound of flesh underneath boldly, causing Hermione to emit a soft gasp.

“Harry! My parents... They might hear us!” She hissed at him, trying to push his hand away but Harry merely growled and began nibbling and sucking at her neck, pressing his arousal firmly against her and keeping his hand stubbornly underneath her bra.

She tried to tell him off again but found herself moaning instead, pressing her hands against his broad back and marveling at the wonderful sensation he was giving her. She didn’t protest when Harry

nipped at a sensitive spot on her neck, his lips trailing downward towards her collarbone, which he kissed gently.

“Mmm...Hermione...” He whispered again, causing her to whimper when his lips left her skin. She didn’t have time to complain however when she felt his lips on her upper stomach instead, moving upwards underneath her nightgown.

“Harry don’t...” She tried to protest just as Harry began his administrations on her left breast, nearly causing her to moan out loud if not for the hand he suddenly clamped on her mouth to muffle the sound.

She squirmed underneath him, her hands heavily entangled in his hair and her moans still muffled by his hand as Harry teased her relentlessly with his lips. She was breathing heavily when he stopped and looked up at her with a teasing smirk, which she met with a weak, heavy-lidded glare.

“I hate you.”

Harry grinned at this and leaned over, planting a gentle kiss on her mouth.

“I know you do, love.” He quipped, now planting butterfly kisses all over her face. Hermione couldn’t help smiling back, nuzzling her cheek against his chest as she pulled him into a warm embrace, both teenagers sighing contentedly.

Harry chuckled, shaking his head.

“You’re lucky your parents are downstairs right now. Otherwise, I’d have my wicked way with you the entire night.” He told her, a dangerously sexy tone in his voice that sent shivers down Hermione’s entire form.

“Is that so...?” She asked him, raising a disbelieving eyebrow which Harry met with a wicked grin, his eyes gleaming in thought.

"I'd rather we be in a place where no one could hear you scream." He drawled, chuckling to himself as Hermione swatted his arm, blushing furiously.

"Oh you and your pervertedness." She muttered, hastily sitting up and readjusting her robe just as the Slytherin lay contentedly back down on her bed, grabbing her pillow and burying his face in it to inhale her sweet scent.

She noticed this and was about to ask him what he was doing when she heard a knock on her door again, this time her father's voice echoing through the door.

"Hermione, honey? We're just about to watch a movie in the family hall, would you care to join us? Why is your room locked?" He asked her, knocking on the door once more.

Hermione muffled a shriek and yanked her smirking boyfriend from her bed, hastily shoving him into her closet.

"Just a second, Daddy!" She called back, looking around the room in panic.

"Don't you *dare* make a sound!" She hissed dangerously at Harry as she shoved him deeper into the closet. Harry opened his mouth to respond but Hermione had already shut the door, taking a quick glance in the mirror to fix herself before she finally opened the door to her room.

Her father stared back curiously at her, his blue eyes alight with humor.

"Princess? Are you...alright?" He asked her, glancing briefly around the room before his eyes settled on her once more.

Hermione nodded a bit too quickly, giving him a bright smile.

"I-I'm fine, Daddy. I-I was just getting ready for bed when you knocked on my door. I-I think I'll pass on the movie tonight though. I'm going to turn in early." She told him, leaning over and planting a kiss on his cheek.

Mr. Granger looked as though he was going to protest but Hermione, once again, was already shoving him out the door, waving him away.

“Good night, Daddy! I’ll see you in the morning.” She called to him, locking the door once more before leaning against it, taking a deep breath of relief.

She was too tired to react when her closet door swung open and Harry stood inside—one shoulder leaning sexily against the door frame, arms crossed over his chest, a smug smile on his face.

“*Potter*. You will be the death of me.” She managed to say weakly, massaging her temples as Harry laughed and walked over to her, enveloping her in his arms.

“Listen...I’d really love to stay and do wicked things to you for the rest of the night, Hermione...But unfortunately, I’ve got to get going. Lucius will kill me if he finds out I left Montmayne without his knowledge.” He told her disappointedly, glancing at his watch.

Hermione instantly felt a pang of sadness at his words but nodded, knowing he was right. She hugged him tightly, almost as though she was afraid of letting him go.

“You should. It’s past eleven. How are you going to get back?” She asked him, looking slightly concerned but Harry shook his head, giving her a reassuring smile.

“I’ve got some floo powder left. Since your parents are already upstairs watching a movie, I thought I’d use your fireplace below to get back. Would that be alright?” He asked, removing the pouch of powder from his pocket.

Hermione nodded and gestured towards the door.

“I suppose so. I’ll lead you downstairs quietly...My parents usually watch television really loud so we shouldn’t have a problem.” She said, giving him a small smile.

Harry nodded, looking a bit put out at having to leave.

“Hey...Thanks for coming here tonight, Harry. It really meant a lot to me. I—I was feeling a bit put out at not being able to go with you tonight.” She admitted, allowing him to pull her into a warm hug.

“I know. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let Lucius dictate to me like that. It won’t happen again, I promise. From now on, wherever I go, *you* go.” He assured her, giving her a loving kiss on the forehead.

Hermione smiled at that, nodding her assent before pulling away from his embrace.

When Harry looked as though he was still reluctant to leave, Hermione laugh and pulled him towards the door.

“Come on, Harry...It’s not like we won’t be seeing each other in two weeks. I’ll be staying with you and AJ for the last two weeks of summer, remember? Now come on...Before any of the Malfoys suspect you’re gone. Or worse, AJ starts freaking out.” She told him, adjusting his robes for him before giving him a kiss on the cheek.

Harry rolled his eyes but smiled and nodded, following Hermione outside her room as she began to quietly lead him downstairs.

“Don’t you *dare* make a sound, Harry James Potter.” She threatened darkly, causing the Slytherin to give her mocking salute in the dark. She rolled her eyes, hiding a smile behind her hand.

As they made their way down the corridor towards the stairs, Harry looked around curiously, taking in the modest but comfortable furniture and homey atmosphere around him, realizing that this had been the place Hermione had grown up in as a child.

He was about to comment on this when he felt the floor give out from underneath him, causing him to curse in surprise before he stumbled rather loudly and ungracefully down the stairs, much to Hermione’s nervous grimace.

Wincing in pain and red with embarrassment at his ungraceful tumble, Harry looked up at Hermione from the bottom of the stairs, giving her a nervous smile.

“Ouch...?” He offered, shrugging apologetically.

“Potter! You clumsy idiot! I have never—”

“What on *earth* is going on out there?” Hermione bit her lip as she barely had any time to react to her father’s confused query when the man in question showed up beside her, taking in her nervous smile and the green-robed boy sprawled at the bottom of the stairs.

Her mother soon appeared behind him, a look of both confusion and later—recognition on her features when she caught sight of the awkward grimace of the handsome boy looking up at her daughter.

“Ehehe... Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I’m Harry Potter...I believe your daughter’s told you about me...?” The Slytherin finally managed to blurt out after a long moment of uncomfortable silence, managing an embarrassed laugh.

Hermione groaned and buried her face in her hands, failing to see the look of genuine surprise on both her mother and father’s face before she heard her mother’s amused voice.

“Hermione...? I believe you have some explaining to do.”

“I love you.”

AJ opened her eyes upon hearing his words, her chest heaving heavily from exhaustion as Draco pulled her unclothed form towards his own, covering them both with a silk blanket as he allowed their heated bodies to cool slowly. He leaned over her for a moment, giving her a gentle kiss on the forehead before he pulled her closer, wrapping his arms around her small waist.

They were silent for a long moment before Draco spoke again, his voice soft.

“How do you feel?” He asked her, stroking her back carefully from behind.

AJ blinked again, blushing as she pictured in her mind, everything that had just happened between them. In contrast to all the other girls in Slytherin who seemed to have a lot of information regarding what happens between two people in the bedroom, she had absolutely *no* idea what to expect before tonight.

Draco had been completely gentle with her...Knowing exactly where to kiss...Where to touch her...Where to tease her relentlessly until she positively cried out for him in want and need. She felt her cheeks coloring again, shaking her head to clear away her embarrassment.

She was completely surprised and a bit enthralled at how physically intimate—intrusive to some—the act of making love was. She had literally given herself up to Draco in ways she never thought were possible...And he had given himself to her in the same way. She was at a loss for words.

Strangely, she felt so vulnerable now...Like she had opened up a part of herself to him that she had never shown or given to anyone else. She didn't know what to say to him...Or how to respond to what had just happened. She wasn't even sure if he felt the same way.

AJ sighed and turned over to her side, resting her head against the pillow.

"AJ...?" Draco asked in concern, turning over and planting a gentle kiss on her bare shoulder. AJ closed her eyes at the sensation, noticing how her body now seemed to recognize Draco's own as though their physical beings had established a separate intimate relationship of their own.

"Draco...I...That was *beautiful*." She whispered softly, taking a long deep breath as she tried to compose herself, still unsure of what she was supposed to say.

He leaned over and tilted her face backwards to meet his, allowing her to see the tender look he had in his eyes.

"I know."

He pressed his lips slightly against hers, trying to comfort her through a chaste kiss which eventually did nothing but take her breath away once more.

"I won't lie to you. I've done that several times before with other girls, AJ...But...It never felt as wonderful as it did with you. I promise you that." He told her, leaning back towards his bed and staring up into the beautiful canopy above them, deep in thought.

AJ nodded her assent, squeezing the hand he had around her waist.

"Can you...Can you stay and sleep with me here tonight?" He asked her quietly, turning over and meeting her green eyes.

She gave him a smile in response, raising a hand and cupping his cheek tenderly. "What about your party, Draco? That was a gift from your parents." She pointed out, raising her eyebrows.

Draco smirked but leaned towards her touch, placing his own hand over the hand she on his cheek and guiding the fragile limb to his lips before placing it on his bare chest right over his beating heart.

"You're the best gift I've ever gotten, anyway."

A/N: A bit of a slow start but I promise I have a lot of ideas for this story. Take note of some of the characters introduced here as they will play important roles later on not only in this story but in the AAA series.

Next Chapter Includes: Dudley and the Dementor, the Ministry of Magic and Grimmauld Place. Plus, who are this year's Gryffindor/Slytherin prefects?

Please review!

Chapter 3 – Past, Present, and Future

Dear Harry,

As you read this, I'll probably be on my way over to Privet Drive with my parents. We should get there within a couple of hours. We decided it would be better to get there the muggle way lest your Aunt or Uncle freak out like they do whenever Malfoy or Zabini comes to visit you.

By the way, I thought you should know—my parents loved you. They've been talking about you all the time since your visit a couple of weeks ago. Hermione, why didn't you tell me your boyfriend was so smart? Hermione, Harry is such a charming young man, isn't he? Or—Hermione, why don't you invite young Harry over next summer? Your relatives would love to meet him, he's ever so handsome. Ugh. Sometimes I get the feeling they'd prefer you over me as a child.

I suppose I should mention to them that you're one half of the most notorious pair in Slytherin. If they knew what that meant of course. You sure know how to work your charm on just about anyone, don't you? Anyway, they've brought a present for both you and AJ when I told them we'd be arriving on your birthdays. Merlin, you have to wonder how fast the summer flew by. After a few more weeks, we'll be back at Hogwarts. I'm almost scared to find out how much everything is going to change when we do.

Anyway, we'll talk more when I get there. I have your birthday present here with me too. I bought AJ a new magical camera...Her old one was a bit battered. I figured she'd like a chance of building new memories. I also have that present you asked me to buy for her from you. I'm really excited as to what her reaction is going to be...She's been writing to me how much she wanted it for herself. As for my present for you, you'll have to wait.

I'll see you soon, Harry.

Love,

Hermione

Smiling to himself, Harry carefully folded up the letter and tucked it into his trunk. Standing up, he took a quick glance around the room he shared with AJ, surveying the surroundings.

Two days before Hermione had owled to tell him she'd be spending the rest of the summer with them, Harry had immediately snapped at his sister to make the room as clean as possible.

Although she had a scowl on her face at his demands, AJ had obliged and had tucked all of Harry's scattered possessions out of the way, leaving the room completely neat and orderly for Hermione's arrival.

Fortunately, the Dursleys were terrified enough of Harry to offer another spare room for the unexpected guest. AJ had agreed to allow Hermione to stay with Harry in their old room and take the guest room instead, jumping at the opportunity of avoiding the experience of being in the same room with a couple who hasn't seen each other in about three weeks.

Despite the fact that AJ had assured the Dursleys that Hermione was a muggleborn witch who wouldn't cause any trouble, Vernon had been adamant and had threatened them to keep away from Dudley, no doubt thinking of the last time they had a *guest*—Draco—in their house.

Harry smirked to himself, checking his watch quickly before walking over to the mirror beside the bathroom. All morning owls had been swooping in and out of their room carrying heavy packages containing their birthday presents from all their friends— Draco, Blaise, Sirius and a lot of their other housemates.

Draco had been the most extravagant of course. He had given Harry a silk black collared cape to wear either over their school uniform or any casual wear. Harry was sure Draco had one made for himself as well as he inspected the crest specially tailored just below the left collarbone area. Two intertwined serpents— one black, one silver— wrapped around the green Slytherin crest.

It was their—his and Draco's— newly completed symbol for themselves. The symbol they intended to make themselves known for

in the future once they initiated their plans for their fifth year. It would be the symbol for the league of wizards they intended to train for the upcoming war.

It's only a matter of time now. Harry thought, a sneer on his face.

Of course, the gifts hadn't stopped there. Draco's real gift for him was actually a magical lighter—a silver bracelet in the form of a snake that wrapped around his middle finger and circled around his wrist. He merely had to press his middle finger against his palm to ignite a beautiful green flame. It was his favorite gift so far.

As for his sister...Harry snorted.

He remembered the exasperated look on AJ's face upon opening the expensive gifts Draco had sent her. His best friend had definitely gone all out in buying her a pair of beautiful diamond-hilted barrettes along with a gorgeous privately tailored black dress made of the finest silk.

AJ had blushed profusely upon reading the note that came with it but when Harry had asked to see, she had whisked it away hastily, laughing nervously and shaking her head.

Another present Harry particularly liked was the one he had gotten from Sirius—a magical pocketknife which procured practically every kind of blade from a knife, to a dagger, or even a small sword. Evidently, Sirius agreed he needed to defend himself too.

In contrast, he had gotten AJ an enchanted mirror which the girl had found amusing as the mirror occasionally shouted out humorous comments at anyone who used it.

As for their other presents, Harry had to admit they had gotten a good load this year. Blaise had sent him a pair of dragon-hide boots and AJ a porcelain doll he had bought for her in France. The doll surprisingly had an uncanny resemblance to AJ, a trait no doubt Blaise had found interesting enough to buy the doll for her.

The rest of the presents were still pretty good but not as memorable as the others—mostly chocolates and books from their housemates

and some from Harry's admirers, most of which he had just given to his sister.

A loud tapping suddenly broke Harry out of his stupor as he blinked and turned to look at the source of the noise. He blinked again in surprise as he saw a large handsome falcon resting upon the windowsill outside their room, its big eyes peering curiously at him.

It tapped on the window with its beak again; looking almost irritated at Harry's stunned expression. Inside the bathroom, he could hear his twin sister humming softly to herself amidst the sound of the shower—obviously unaware of the weird situation Harry found himself in.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he stood up immediately from the bed, walking towards the window and hesitantly opening the latch.

The falcon flew in immediately, landing haughtily on his desk and giving the Slytherin an impatient look, its features proud and royal as it gestured to the large parcel tied to its legs.

"Alright...Who's the haughty snob who sent a *falcon* to give us our presents?" Harry grumbled to himself, rolling his eyes as he walked over to the glaring animal and slowly loosened the parcel from its legs.

"Watch it." Harry cursed as the Falcon fidgeted impatiently once more as he took the parcel from it.

As soon as he had relieved it of its load, the animal fixed Harry with one more piercing look before it took off once again, flying with more than twice the speed of any normal owl he had ever seen.

Harry watched it briefly, waiting until it disappeared among the clouds before he turned to the wrapped package in his hands, surveying it closely.

Who the bloody hell owns a falcon? He wondered as he set the package on the bed and slowly unwrapped it, failing to see the attached note that had fallen to the floor.

His eyes widened when the ugly brown paper gave way to reveal a black lacquered box, its cover adorned with a single, large symbol Harry had definitely become familiar with.

That...That sign. He thought, running his hands delicately over the insignia that was imprinted onto his own back. Last year, Dumbledore had merely told him it was a mark of his maturation as a young wizard—coming into his magical inheritance as the heir of Salazar Slytherin.

His eyes narrowed as the conversation he had with Dumbledore last year flashed through his mind, almost as if it had happened yesterday.

Harry bit his lip as AJ gazed intently at him, her eyes resting on the scar on his forehead. "You were marked by Lord Voldemort himself Harry... You were marked by Salazar Slytherin's very own heir meaning you were magically given his powers...His abilities...His heritage...I'm sure he did not want that to happen of course...But it did...And now, Harry James Potter...You are—magically—a descendant of Salazar Slytherin." Dumbledore finished, waiting for the two teenagers' reaction.

To say Harry had been surprised was an understatement.

He was *thrilled* at the idea of being the heir of Salazar Slytherin. More importantly, the power that came with it.

He now understood why the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets had followed both him *and* Voldemort upon parseltongue instructions...Or why he had been sorted into Slytherin despite being of half-blood heritage.

He was Slytherin's magical descendant. It was his destiny.

He knew, however, one very important thing. Something wasn't right. Dumbledore was not telling him everything.

He examined the crest on the chest silently, memorizing every detail of the sophisticated symbol. A snake coiled dangerously up a long sword that gleamed proudly amidst the black of the lacquer chest.

The emblem was beautiful—simple yet regal at the same time. Completely intimidating.

Draco had once told him that many pureblooded families imprinted their family crest on treasured family belongings. Harry was guessing this was one of those cases and he had no idea what could be inside.

Hands slightly trembling, he slowly unlatched the lock and opened the cover, bracing himself for the sight that greeted him underneath. Inside lay encased in black velvet was an ornate wand case similar to the one Lucius had given Draco for his fifteenth birthday.

The wand case was made of the same lacquered material as the crested box it had come from although the family crest was instead, a small silver figurine resting on the tip just before the silver handle.

Harry stared at it for a long time, almost certain he had seen this very object somewhere before although the answer eluded him. Whoever sent this to him obviously came from a noble, pureblooded family. That he was completely sure of.

“Ooh. Who sent you *that*?”

He jumped and turned around to see AJ walking out of the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel like a turban and another towel wrapped around her form. He scowled as she walked toward him, dripping all over the floor.

She rolled her eyes. “Relax, jerk-face. I’ll clean it up. Hermione won’t notice a thing. Now who sent you that...?” She asked curiously, removing the wand case from his grasp and inspecting it closely.

“Watch it, AJ. We don’t even know who that’s from. It could be from Voldemort for all we know.” He warned her, causing his sister to flinch at the name but otherwise hand him back the object.

“Well...Didn’t it come with a note? Who sent it?” She asked him, looking through the discarded wrapping paper on the floor.

Harry shook his head and sat down, holding the wand case up to the light.

"I didn't see anything. It was brought here by a handsome falcon though. Something I'd never thought I'd see swooping into our room at this time." He commented, snorting derisively.

AJ didn't say anything but bent down, retrieving a small envelope from the floor. An irritated look on her face, she held it up in front of his face, waving it around mockingly.

"You really *should* check who *sends* you a gift Harry. You did the same thing with Draco's and Blaise's presents." She told him, rolling her eyes and flicking the envelope at him before heading towards the closet to change.

Harry had the grace to look sheepish but took the envelope, ripping through the lid to pull out the small parchment concealed inside. Nervously, he read the finely written words with bated breath.

Harry,

I wish I could tell you everything there is to know. For now, however, it seems that is not possible. It is too dangerous for you to know the truth. So for now...I shall content myself with presenting you this. Please accept it and use it well.

It will bring you much authority and power should you use it in the proper light. I realize it is both yours and your sister's birthday today. Please offer her my apologies but I feel that since you are older, it is most important to give this to you. I will make it up to her. As well as to you.

I promise you your queries will all be answered soon...And I will reveal myself to both of you. I will be waiting. We will see each other soon.

The letter ended there.

Furiously, Harry inspected the parchment from behind before crumpling it into a ball and hurling it across the room.

He didn't need this.

Once again, he felt like he wasn't in control of his own life and that drove him crazy. Whoever sent him this letter was playing him the same way Dumbledore was—luring him around by hiding him from the truth.

He just wanted to know who he *was*. For the life of him, he could *not* understand why it was so difficult for people like Dumbledore to tell him that. He wasn't a child anymore.

I'll show him. Harry thought, his eyes darkening dangerously. *I'll prove to that old bastard that I'm not the witless wonder he wants me to be. I'll play him at his own game.* He thought, sneering to himself, seething with anger.

Then, he shut his eyes tightly as a flicker of pain surged through his mind, causing him to recoil slightly. He tensed, his hands clenching into tight fists as he felt a strong violent urge to ram them into something hard.

He reeled back in pain, biting his tongue to keep himself from screaming out loud. His head was throbbing excruciatingly and he finally gave up and gave a harsh scream, collapsing to the floor.

AJ's panicked cries barely registered in his head as he began banging his fists against his head—*anything* to stop the pain.

He managed to make out a faint sound of harsh laughter echoing in his ears before he opened his eyes to the sight of the room blackening and spinning around him, the worried face of his sister looming over his convulsing form.

He wanted to destroy something.

Anything to get rid of the pain in his head.

Kill. Kill. Harry shook his head and screamed in both anger and pain in an attempt to drown out the harsh whispers in his head.

Feel the anger...Boy...

At the ringing in his ears, Harry eyes flew open harshly, his eyes a flashing shade of scarlet.

"Harry!"

He blinked, turning perfectly calm, emerald green orbs to his sister, who stared at him as though he was insane.

"I'm sorry, AJ...You were saying something?" He asked her, giving his sister a curious look.

AJ's eyes widened, her eyes flicking repeatedly from his scar to his eyes.

"Wha...Y-you...Harry! What happened?!" She blurted out, finally calling his attention to the fact that he was kneeling on the floor near the foot of the bed with his sister kneeling beside him, her face pale and worried.

Harry turned a genuinely confused look to her, shaking his head as he made himself to stand up and sit back on the bed in exhaustion. He blinked several times again to clear his head before turning to face her, his expression completely nonplussed.

"AJ...I don't know what you're talking about. I...I'm tired but...that's about it." He told her, burying his face in his hands. He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart, unsure of what to tell her.

The truth was, he really had *no* idea what had just happened. He remembered the anger he felt about Dumbledore's secrecy but all the thoughts that had followed after that eluded him.

All he remembered was the anger...The intense need to destroy something...*anything* in his path. He didn't know where it had come from but he had never felt anything like it before. He was almost sure it wasn't his.

AJ took a deep breath but stood up and plopped down next to him, her damp hair dripping onto the dry sheets of their shared bed.

“Whatever it was, Harry...You scared me. You...You were shaking. Screaming. Are you *sure* you don’t remember anything?” She asked him quietly, her worried eyes fixed intently on his tense figure.

Hesitantly, she placed a hand on his shoulder only to have her twin brother pull back sharply, turning to give her a menacing glare.

“I’m *fine*, AJ. Look... *You* don’t understand what just happened either so stop trying to pretend you could help me.” He snapped, his eyes flashing dangerously before he stood up and left the room in anger, taking his new wand case with him and slamming the door shut behind him.

AJ stared after the closed door sadly from where she still sat on their bed; her eyes downcast and her shoulders slumped in defeat. “You’re not helping me to, Harry.” She whispered to herself before sighing and getting up, moving to clean the room once more.

Her eyes came upon the ball of crumpled of paper on the floor and she bent down to pick it up, unrolling the letter Harry had been reading just a couple of minutes before he had collapsed onto the floor.

Her eyes traveling over the elegantly written words, AJ’s eyebrows fused together and her facial features twisted into a frown. Setting the letter aside, she stared once more at the door Harry had slammed, her own thoughts drowning her mind.

What are you not telling me, Harry...?

It was about fifteen later when Harry felt terrible for the way he had snapped at his sister about what had happened. Just several minutes after he had stormed out of their room, he had come across the beautifully wrapped present AJ had left waiting for him on their table, the brightly covered package sending uneasy feelings of guilt down his gut.

Since the Dursleys had gone grocery shopping for the morning, Harry had bounded downstairs for a quick breakfast. As he walked into the

dining room, however, he immediately saw the present waiting for him in his seat, recognizing it immediately for AJ's careful wrapping.

Opening the gift slowly, he came upon the beautiful handmade photo album his sister had made for him—no doubt explaining the long nights she had locked herself up in the attic secretly working on it—and he felt even more horrible.

Carefully turning the pages, he had to smile as he saw the mixture of both muggle and wizard photographs inside. Each page had been arranged in chronological order as it showed pictures of them as babies with their parents, as little children, teenagers, all the way to their present age.

AJ had also included several pictures of their friends as well as a picture of him and Hermione AJ had taken in their fourth year. Curious, he slid the piece of parchment tucked inside the album, reading AJ's neat handwriting.

I'll have you know...I had to use a pensieve to take pictures of some of these memories. Happy birthday, Harry. Love, AJ.

In spite of himself, he allowed a small smile and shook his head. He had wondered when AJ had taken some of the photographs in here. It was just like her to think of using a pensieve to look back and take photographs of their old memories.

He'd give his gift for her later. He didn't have it yet but he could only hope it made up for his behavior. He knew for a fact that AJ would love it as Hermione had been the one who had suggested the gift to him.

Sighing, he put the album back down on the table, his eyes traveling up to the silent bedroom he knew his sister was in. He was just about to get up apologize to her when he heard a loud knock on their front door, causing him to bolt up in both surprise.

"I'll get it!" He called over to AJ before he turned and took a quick, sweeping glance over his appearance from the table's reflective surface. Since he didn't want to look too dressed up in his own home, he had instead worn a dark collared shirt and a pair of faded blue

jeans. He noticed that he barely looked like the regal leader of Slytherin house and posed the image of an impish boy next door.

The self-observed fact irritated him mildly.

Rolling his eyes at himself, he quickly set AJ's present for him on the counter beside their room before walking towards the door, unconsciously running a hand through his hair.

Almost immediately after he had opened the door, he found himself in the death grip of his Gryffindor girlfriend, who had surged into his arms happily.

"Harry!" She greeted, planting a kiss on his cheek before she hugged him again, nearly cutting off his air supply.

"Mione...C-can't...Breathe." He managed to say, causing the brunette to give a sheepish smile but otherwise loosen her grip, her smile as bright as ever.

The Slytherin found himself smiling back, his eyes brightening as he took in her beautiful face. Hermione was wearing a yellow sleeveless summer dress that fit perfectly onto her slender figure, emphasizing each delicate curve as it ended in a graceful flow just above her knees.

Her hair was pulled back into a half ponytail; several strands left free to frame her glowing brown eyes while Harry's silver serpent pendant hung elegantly from her neck, contrasting attractively against her pale skin.

"You look...gorgeous." He blurted stupidly, his eyes roaming over her from head to foot. Hermione blushed but laughed her appreciation, gesturing to the two smiling adults behind her.

"Harry, you remember my parents..." She offered and immediately Hermione's mother swooped forward, seizing Harry's hand and shaking it repeatedly.

"Harry Potter. Always a pleasure. We don't mean to intrude and all... Hermione told us to leave after dropping her off but we just wanted to

give you your birthday gift before we did.” She said cheerfully, her eyes sparkling in warmth.

Harry laughed and shook his head, giving the older woman a charming smile.

“Not to worry, Mrs. Granger. Although you really shouldn’t have bothered with a present.” He told her, offering a sheepish grin as he tucked a hand behind his head in embarrassment.

Hermione watched him affectionately, rolling her eyes at the way he was once again trying to captivate her parents.

“Nonsense, Harry. Here...It isn’t much...But we thought you’d appreciate it. Hermione’s mother baked it herself.” Mr. Granger offered, adjusting his square frames for a moment before offering Harry a rather large box.

Peering inside, Harry grinned up at them, nodding his gratitude. “Chocolate. My sister will have this finished by tonight.” He kidded, causing both parents to chuckle in amusement.

“For your information, I will *not*, Harry. *You’re* the one who sneaks out for midnight snacks.” AJ retorted as she came up behind him, causing Harry to turn around in mild surprise.

She smiled at Hermione and the two girls exchanged warm, tight hugs before she turned to Hermione’s parents, offering a friendly smile.

“Of my goodness...George...Look at her, bless them...Twins...Aren’t they an adorable sight?” Mrs. Granger observed, eyeing Harry and AJ with an excitement of a little girl playing with her Barbie dolls.

Harry’s smile turned into a slight grimace but AJ laughed and nodded, managing a good-natured laugh.

“We get that all the time. Thank you so much for the cake, Mr. and Mrs. Granger...Harry and I both love sweets. I was just going to go out and buy a cake myself...Now I won’t have to.” She told them,

oblivious to Hermione's bored glaring at her parents as the two adults beamed once more.

"I *told* you, Hermione dear...And here you were about them already having dozens of cakes by this time." Mr. Granger pointed out, this time causing Hermione to let out an exasperated sigh.

"Daaaad...Don't you and mom have to *go* now...? You're going to be late for your jobs." Hermione pointed out dully, much to Harry's amusement as her parents laughed and obliged, noticing their daughter's embarrassment.

"Alright, Hermione...We'll go. But not before a kiss from our little princess... You are, after all, going to be gone again for almost a year. We'll miss you." Her father replied, leaning forward so Hermione could give him a kiss on the cheek.

Harry hid an amused laugh by pretending to cough, causing AJ to give him a sharp, reprimanding look.

As soon as Hermione had kissed both her parents, the two adults bid their farewells to the two Slytherins and began making their way back to their car, their lively chattering echoing from the house entrance.

Hermione watched them leave, waving until the car had rounded the corner and had disappeared from site, leaving her alone with a beaming AJ and a smirking Harry.

"Your parents are so cute, Hermione." AJ told her, giving her another smile before she ushered the girl in, taking the cake and setting it on the table while Harry took the Hermione's trunk and easily carried it into the house. Hermione plopped down on the couch in the living room, watching in fascination as AJ began busying herself about in the kitchen.

Although it was a bit of a surprise for her to see AJ Potter rummaging around like a common maid in a muggle kitchen, she hid it well with a smile plastered on her face. Harry took the seat next to her, wrapping an arm possessively around her shoulders.

“Yeah...You should have seen them when they were trying to convince me to watch a Disney movie.” Harry muttered under his breath, causing both girls to laugh in earnest.

“They’re very affectionate but otherwise, very responsible parents.” Hermione told them, her eyes now riveting around the house in avid curiosity. The house was nothing like the kind of setting she—no doubt every other student in Hogwarts—had imagined the Potter twins to be living in every summer.

“Have you had breakfast, Hermione? I was just about to make some...Lucky for you the Dursleys aren’t here. They won’t be back for another couple of hours so we have the place to ourselves.” AJ’s voice rang out from the kitchen as Hermione heard several pots and pans clanging about.

Before she could reply however, she gasped as Harry’s hand slid seductively up her leg, causing her to turn and see the mischievous grin on his face.

“Was that a yes, Hermione?” AJ asked again once from the kitchen, obviously unaware of the fact that her brother was running his hand up and down Hermione’s legs.

Hermione slapped his hand away, giving him an indignant glare before answering the raven-haired girl. “Breakfast would be lovely, AJ...Thank you. Would you like any help in there?” She asked, ignoring the impatient grumbling she heard from the Slytherin beside her.

“No thanks, Hermione. I’m alright...I love cooking.” AJ called back cheerfully, much to Hermione’s surprise. She was about to voice it out when Harry started his administrations again, this time pulling her onto his lap and nuzzling her neck.

“Harry...Would you stop...?” She hissed, trying to wriggle free but he would have none of it, giving her a glare.

“Aw come on, Hermione...I haven’t had the chance to be alone with you all summer...” He whined under his breath so AJ wouldn’t hear

them from the kitchen, his hands snaking around her waist again much to Hermione's annoyance *and* amusement.

"Well then I suppose you can wait a little while longer. Your sister is just in the next room, how awkward do you think this is for me?" She pointed out, pointedly getting off his lap and reclaiming her seat on the couch.

Harry rolled his eyes and grumbled under his breath again, effectively looking like an impatient ten-year-old kid. Hermione had to laugh at his expression and stood up, leaning forward briefly to plant a kiss on his forehead.

"Let me get your present." She told him, giving him a smile before walking over to where she had left her trunk.

"I hope you guys aren't making out in there. It would be really horrible for me to walk in on something as traumatizing as that." AJ called out from the kitchen once more, her voice sounding a bit disturbed at the idea.

At that, Hermione turned and gave Harry a pointed look which the Slytherin returned with a menacing sneer, rolling his eyes at her. Before he could say anything however, Hermione had managed to retrieve a small flask from the bottom of her trunk, holding it up in the light for Harry to see.

The flask was filled with a bright, clear liquid the same shade as the morning sky which, Hermione thought to herself, reminded her of a bubblegum flavor she had once tried.

Smiling, she handed the flask over to Harry, who took it in utter confusion.

"Happy birthday, Harry." She told him, leaning over and brushing her lips briefly against his. Harry didn't respond however but stared at the liquid in query, his green eyes inspecting its bright blue color.

"Er...Hermione...What is this?" He asked her uncertainly, removing the lid and sniffing the odorless liquid inside the flask.

Hermione gave an impatient tutting sound and took the flask from him again, holding it up against the light once more.

“Oh, Harry...Don’t you know what this is? It’s the *Optus* Potion...One of the most difficult potions to make in the Wizarding world. I spent about four months working on this for you...And that was *after* the three weeks I used up in trying to obtain all its rare ingredients.” She explained calmly, her brown eyes focused intently on the fruit of her labor.

At that, Harry’s expression softened and he offered her a smile, beckoning for her to come forward. Hermione obliged and sat down on his lap, eagerly handing him back the vial.

“Well...Go on. Drink it.” She urged him, watching him excitedly.

Harry raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow, his eyes moving from the potion to Hermione’s sparkling brown eyes.

“How can I make sure this potion won’t kill me?” He teased lightly, causing the Gryffindor punch him lightly on the stomach. Hermione glared at him, her lips pursed.

“Ha...Ha. Very funny, Potter. Just drink it. You’ll find out what it does after you do.” She told him, taking the bottle impatiently from him and holding it up to his lips.

“Alright, Alright! Hold on.” Harry managed to say before he took the potion warily from Hermione’s grasp, eyed it and drank it all in one single gulp.

Neither of the two teenagers spoke for a couple of moments before Harry blinked in confusion, his vision suddenly blurring inconceivably as though someone had removed his glasses.

“Bloody hell, Hermione! You ruined my eyesight...It’s ruined enough as it is!” Harry grumbled angrily, setting the potion bottle down onto the table and rubbing his eyes to clear the images.

The Gryffindor smirked in response, shaking her head in disbelief at the Slytherin's ignorance. "Oh, Potter...Remove your contacts, will you?" She suggested, tapping his forehead pointedly.

Still grumbling, Harry obliged rather reluctantly, turning away from Hermione and placing the gels back in the container in his pocket.

"Well...What is it then Grang—Oh. *Oh.*" Harry stopped himself mid-sentence as he blinked rapidly, his green eyes zooming around the living room in surprise.

"You like it?" Hermione asked him, smiling as she watched Harry look around in amazement, reveling in his newly repaired eyesight.

"Holy Merlin...Hermione, how did you do this? This is amazing...Now I don't have to wear those dorky glasses anymore. I didn't even *know* there was a potion like this in existence." He managed to say, standing up and circling the room with a triumphant grin on his face.

Hermione laughed, patting the seat next to her. "I figured you'd want to get rid of your glasses soon. I came across this rather difficult spell in an old potions book I bought from an antique bookshop in Diagon Alley and I figured I'd make it for you." She told him just as Harry sat back down and planted a kiss on her forehead.

"I love it. Thank you, Hermione. I love the fact that you worked hard on it." He told her, leaning forward and nuzzling her neck, inhaling her sweet scent.

Hermione smiled and was about to respond when AJ walked back into the room, making a face at the scene that greeted her.

"Jeez. What did I just say...?" She grumbled, setting three plates on the breakfast table along with a large pitcher of orange juice.

Hermione laughed and pulled away from Harry, giving AJ an apologetic smile. "We were just hugging, AJ. I just gave Harry the potion I was telling you about." She told the other girl, standing up and helping AJ with setting the table.

The other girl smiled, shooting an amused look at her brother who was still glancing around the room in utter amazement.

“He loved it, huh? I told you he would. He’s been dying to get rid of those glasses for years now.” She agreed, walking back into the kitchen for the food while Hermione poured them all a glass of juice.

“I have *your* present with me too, AJ. I’ll give it to you once we get settled...It’s okay to sleep on the couch then, right?” She asked, looking at Harry curiously.

Harry looked at her sharply, a surprised expression on his face.

“You’ll do no such thing. AJ will be sleeping in the guestroom beside us...So you’ll be sleeping beside me.” Harry told her, walking over to her and wrapping her in his arms.

Hermione looked thoroughly embarrassed. “What? No...No...AJ, you don’t have to do that! *I* can sleep in the guestroom...*I’m* the guest.” Hermione rushed out, turning to AJ as she walked back into the room with their breakfast.

“It’s fine, Hermione. I know for a fact that Harry’s wanted to be alone with you all summer...Enough to make me clean the room at least five times before you arrived. It’ll be okay.” AJ assured her, ignoring Harry’s glare as she sat down.

Hermione looked like she was about to protest again but Harry had already shoved her into the chair beside him, plopping down next to her.

“You heard her. Now shut up, Granger. I’m hungry.” He said before immediately piling a stack of bacon and sausages onto his plate, failing to see Hermione’s exasperated look.

AJ laughed at her expression, shaking her head. “Harry’s right, Hermione. Don’t worry about it. Seriously.” She assured her, gesturing to the food in front of them.

“Now start eating before it gets cold. I’ll have you know I’m a terrific cook.” She told her smugly before beginning to eat herself, a self-satisfied smile on her face.

“All you do is fry the bacon or sausage and cook the scrambled egg.” Harry stated rather bluntly, earning an irritated glare from his sister and a rather amused laugh from his girlfriend.

“Alright, then Mr. Potter. Next time, *you* cook breakfast for yourself then.” AJ snapped back, shoving a forkful of bacon into her mouth and chewing in frustration.

Harry gave her a smirk but remained silent, all the while oblivious to the stares Hermione was giving them as she continually shook her head.

“I’ll never understand you two. In any case, AJ... I believe Harry has a surprise for you... Don’t you, Harry?” Hermione encouraged knowingly, causing AJ to give Harry a confused look.

Harry looked slightly surprised at that, his spoon stopping halfway from his mouth. “Er...Yes, I do. Although I wasn’t supposed to give it to her until after breakfast, Hermione.”

Hermione shook her head, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Oh I couldn’t have waited that long, Harry. Come on, can we give it to her?” She asked him, jumping up from her seat and walking over to the large box situated right next to her luggage.

Rolling his eyes, Harry stood up and walked over to it, picking it up and setting the box on the table right in front of AJ’s line of vision. The girl in question widened her eyes, looking from Harry to the box.

“What is it...?”

Harry poked her nose affectionately, sitting back down across from her and digging into his breakfast again. “Open it, troll-face. You’ll see. By the way... Just so you know... Although I bought the present and planned everything else, Hermione was the one who suggested it... In case you freak out.” He added, smirking when he met Hermione’s irritated glare.

AJ nodded in understanding and reached out to open the present with slightly shaking hands, her eyes wide with anticipation. As soon as the cover flap had opened, however, she jumped back immediately in surprise, an ecstatic expression on her face.

“Mraw?”

“Oh, Merlin! Harry, I love it!” She squealed in delight, jumping up from her seat and rushing over to hug her twin brother, who promptly choked on the food he was currently trying to consume.

“AJ, are you trying to kill me?!” He exclaimed in half-annoyance, half-amusement but AJ didn’t hear him, hugging him tightly before moving over to hug Hermione briefly as well.

“I can’t believe you told him I wanted a kitten! I love it!” She exclaimed, smiling at the other girl before turning back to the adorable, black kitten blinking up at her from the table with wide, bluish gray eyes. Scooping the kitten up delicately in her arms, she walked over to the sofa—her breakfast forgotten—and began cooing over her new pet.

“Hermione told me how you’ve envied her for having Crookshanks... Well... I heard of this hidden magical pet store near muggle London... I asked Hermione to buy the kitten for me. It’s magically bred—meaning *he* can harness your magical abilities once you develop his loyalty and will live almost as long as you will.” Harry explained, smiling as he watched AJ play with the squirming kitten.

AJ looked up at him in surprise. “Really? Hermione, is Crookshanks a magical cat too?” She asked struggling to keep the squirmy kitten in her arms, much to the kitten’s meowing protests.

The other girl nodded, her eyes riveting to the orange cat positioned near her luggage. Crookshanks was currently eyeing the new animal with a slight hostility in her features, obviously suspicious of its origins.

Nodding in understanding, AJ turned to look at her new kitten, cooing and giving the fidgeting animal a nuzzle. “So you’re a he then, aren’t you? Yes you are...Oh you... Squirmy little bugger...I think I’ll name you...*Asch*...That’s a cute name. *Asch*.” She decided, choosing to ignore Harry’s derisive snort.

“What kind of a name is that?” He drawled but Hermione gave him a pointed glare, indicating for him to keep quiet.

“/ think it’s a wonderful name for him, AJ.” Hermione assured the other girl, causing the other girl to give her a wide smile.

“Can I take him when we go shopping then, Hermione?”

Harry groaned and leaned back against his seat, helplessly stuffing his mouth with bacon.

“This is going to be one long...very *girly*...summer.”

Gazing into the dark, empty stretch of forest ahead, Severus Snape turned to give Albus Dumbledore a mocking sneer.

“You were saying, Albus?” He drawled snidely, his eyes narrowing in accusation at the older wizard languidly looking up into the dark clouds hovering above the Forbidden forest.

Dumbledore responded with a mere apologetic smile, his eyes grim but unworried as he carefully led Severus to two fallen trees near the banks of a nearby pond.

“He’ll be here, Severus. We’re just a little early, is all.” He told the other man almost cheerfully, setting himself down to sit on one fallen tree trunk and gazing avidly around their surroundings.

“Oh wake up, Albus. We’ve been waiting for nearly half an hour. He’s not coming. He’s ratted us out to the Dark Lord, that pureblooded scum.” Snape retorted, his black eyes flashing angrily.

“I must warn you, Severus Snape... It never does one *any* good at all to speak of *any* Malfoy in that disrespectful manner.”

At hearing this, Snape whirled around in shock to see Lucius’ calmly sneering face, his silver eyes flashing in slight anger and suspicion. The potions master returned his expression with one of his own, standing his ground against the influential aristocrat

"You're late, Lucius. Malfoy or not, being late for any appointment is disrespectful as well. Have you forgotten your manners?" Snape replied easily, his eyes narrowed and his hand clenched tightly over the wand in his robe pocket.

The angry flash in Lucius' eyes betrayed the calm smile he bestowed upon the other man in response. "I was held up, Severus. The Dark lord is not one to cut his meetings short for anyone's behalf, after all. Especially as this particular meeting concerns not only the Potters but also the prophecy." He responded easily, much to Dumbledore's immediate response.

"So you have news for us then, Lucius? About Tom's plans concerning the prophecy?" He interrupted before Snape could growl another response, successfully drawing the blonde man's attention to him.

"I'm afraid so, Headmaster. Before I speak, however...I must first seek to make sure we are not being overheard." Lucius began rather uneasily, looking around the dark area.

Dumbledore answered with a slight nod, raising his wand in acknowledgement. "I have placed the necessary spells around the perimeter, Lucius. You may speak freely." He assured him, gesturing for both men to sit down across from him.

Lucius and Severus both obliged, each man giving the other an angry sneer before turning back to the matter at hand.

"There is...I'm afraid...*grave danger* coming to Hogwarts, headmaster. I'm not entirely sure what it is." Lucius started once more, trying to choose his words carefully.

"You have to be more specific, Malfoy." Snape pointed out impatiently, causing Dumbledore to raise his hand as a gesture for Severus to let the other man continue.

"The Dark lord...He knows something...Just now, he speaks to us of an unknown way of penetrating the walls of Hogwarts... One in which he will never be caught...One in which he can collect further

information not only about the prophecy but about his enemies.” Lucius continued, his voice falling into a soft whisper.

Dumbledore’s face remained completely nonchalant as he nodded to show his understanding, urging the other man to elaborate further.

“He...is aware of the ministry’s ignorance...and of how they plan to infiltrate Hogwarts. Somehow, when he discovered this...He laughed and pointed it out as an advantage to his plans. In his own words...It would be like *killing two birds with one stone*.” Lucius spoke softly, his eyes glowing in the darkness of their surroundings.

“What...does he mean by that, Lucius?” Dumbledore asked slowly, his blue eyes deep in concentration.

“I’m not exactly sure, Dumbledore. All I can assure you is that he is confident he will be able to manipulate the ministry. Surprisingly...When one death eater asked him of what to do with the Potter children, he...he *laughed*. He said to...*leave them alone for now...especially young Harry...He may be of use to me*.” He finished, causing Dumbledore to bolt up in alarm.

“Does he know, Lucius? Does he know *anything* about his connection to Harry? Does he know *anything* about Harry’s ancestry?” He asked sharply, his blue eyes riveting back and forth from Snape to Lucius.

“As far as I know, headmaster...All the Dark lord knows is that he bestowed several of his magical capabilities onto Harry the night he attempted to kill him. He does not know that Harry is his supposed Slytherin successor from magical descent.” Snape assured him, looking rather disturbed.

“He does not know that Harry is the other heir of Slytherin? Or his true lineage?” Dumbledore pressed further, his blue eyes creased in agitation and slight alarm.

Both Lucius and Severus shook their heads, causing the older wizard to sit back down wearily onto the fallen tree, the look on his face making him look twice his age.

“And the other pureblood students in Slytherin...? Have they pledged their loyalties to Lord Voldemort?” Dumbledore asked once more, this time directing his question at Snape, who immediately shook his head.

“No...Headmaster. I’ve spoke to some of my students. Strangely, more than half of Slytherin house fully intends to align themselves with Mr. Potter and whatever his cause may be in all this. They are expecting a war, Albus. Rightfully so. And somehow, they expect Harry to be the one leading them right into battle.” He answered.

“We are of course, speaking of the younger, *current* generation of Slytherins here. What of the older generation, Lucius?” Dumbledore asked, his blue eyes riveting to the other man.

Lucius shook his head, looking grim as he spoke. “I’m afraid not, Dumbledore. With the exception of Severus and myself, the older Slytherins’ loyalties are stronger than ever alongside the Dark lord.” He responded, bowing his head.

Dumbledore managed a dry laugh, shaking his head. “Then how amusing it would be... I am sure...When the Slytherin families discover the conflicting loyalties present between them and their sons and daughters.” He pointed out, both men nodding their agreement.

“The older generation siding with their Slytherin leader... The current generation siding with theirs” Lucius agreed, marveling at the complexity of the situation.

“Have you made plans on where the order will be stationed, Albus?” Snape interrupted, drawing the attention of both wizards to his question.

Dumbledore nodded, thinking carefully.

“Thank you for reminding me, Severus. Yes, I believe Sirius has offered the old house of Black—*Grimmauld Place*—to be the temporary hideout of the Order of the Phoenix. Just before the summer ends, I plan to have Harry and AJ escorted there by a group of trained Aurors for further protection. I suggest you bring your son there as well as by that time—if I remember correctly—the order will be having an important meeting and it would be best if you are

present.” He told Lucius, noticing the irritated look on the other man’s face.

“How delightful. More interaction with people like the Weasleys. Sometimes, I wonder if this *being good* drama is more trouble than it’s worth.” Lucius drawled pretentiously, causing Dumbledore to chuckle and Snape to give him a glare.

“You know the answer to that, Lucius. Otherwise, you would have refused just now. Anyway, moving on...What of the plans of the ministry? What do they intend to accomplish by infiltrating Hogwarts?” Dumbledore carried on, his voice sounding a bit restrained as though he was struggling to maintain composure.

Lucius looked perturbed but nodded, his voice dropping to a whisper once more. “If my suspicions serve me correctly, Albus...I believe Cornelius Fudge intends to silence Harry’s claim of the Dark lord’s return. More than that, their plans of instigating Dolores Umbridge into the faculty is a strategic move on their parts to change the curriculum of Defense Against the Dark Arts towards a more theoretical approach.” He explained, much to Snape’s agitation.

“Theoretical approach?! How the bloody hell is *theory* going to help *my* students survive the upcoming war?!” He blurted out angrily, causing Dumbledore to level him with a sharp look.

“That is what Fudge intends to happen. I’m thinking he also wants to keep a close watch on any possible uprisings on the parts of the Wizarding youth—making sure there are no forming conspiracies against him and his position as Minister of Magic.” Lucius commented, smirking.

“Naturally, you aren’t going to accept her into Hogwarts are you, Albus?” Snape asked, turning to the headmaster.

Dumbledore remained silent for a long moment, his blue eyes deep in thought. After a slight pause, he spoke—although rather in resignation.

“If the ministry deems it necessary to have a watchful eye inside Hogwarts...I will of course permit them. I cannot refuse the Minister of

Magic's wishes based purely on these judgments alone. Without the support and belief of Wizarding society regarding mine and Harry's testimony, I have no choice but to accept their conditions." He responded accordingly, looking at both men with a grim smile.

Lucius smirked, shaking his head. "I always knew you were a coward, Albus. Too busy following your codes of honor and morality to fight for what you believe is right. How typically Gryffindor." He mocked in disgust.

Dumbledore smiled at the quip, however, nodding his assent.

"True. How very true, Lucius. However, I look to that trait now as a strength rather than as a weakness. You Slytherins, as I believe, fight for the values you strongly adhere to—sometimes sacrificing whatever it takes for what you believe is a greater cause. A greater good. Am I correct in saying that?" He answered, gazing at the two speechless men in front of him.

"Albus... This is the very reason people initially assume us to be evil, semi-versions of the Dark lord himself. It is because we are ambitious...and that we have dreams of a greater future for the Wizarding world. Unlike others, we understand the sacrifice those kinds of dreams may entail. Tom Riddle...To be rather blunt—is simply a Slytherin gone mad. He took this notion too far...driven by his own blind ambitions that he destroys the very society Salazar Slytherin meant to protect and improve." Snape explained, eliciting a small smile from the headmaster.

"Then I am thankful, Severus...That we have the same understanding of Lord Voldemort. The magic of Slytherin understood Tom Riddle's diversion from Salazar's original dream for the Wizarding world. A dream he had promised upon his deathbed that he would share with the other founders. This is why, I believe, Harry was chosen as the next heir. To pursue the dream Lord Voldemort had willingly abandoned in favor of his own pursuits." Dumbledore told them, speaking in a voice filled with the confidence that betrayed the uncertainty in his eyes.

Lucius and Snape both gaped at him, stunned into silence. After a long pause, Lucius finally managed to speak, looking at Dumbledore uncertainly.

“Have you...told Harry this, Albus?” He asked, looking into Dumbledore’s fatigued expression.

With a sigh, the headmaster shook his head.

“I am rather afraid, Lucius...because I believe I *should* have. I have told young Harry of his inheritance...But other than that, he knows nothing. At the time, I believed it best not to burden his young mind with such a heavy responsibility...lest I bring about the same corruption of ambition as I did with young Tom Riddle many years ago.” He admitted, this time causing Lucius’ eyes to widen and Snape to pale in shock.

“I...didn’t want Harry to turn out the way Tom did—drunk with power at the notion of being assigned such an important responsibility. I did not want to fail him as I have failed the young orphaned Slytherin Voldemort had been.” He finished, looking rather unsure of himself and his actions.

Lucius was looking at him in obvious disgust while Snape remained nonchalant, choosing to mask his emotions with a straight face.

“So what are you going to do, Albus? Keep this a secret from Harry? Wait until he corrupts his own mind with anger and rebellion at all this secrecy and hiding from the people he expects to trust?” He asked calmly, controlling his voice.

“I planned to tell him at the end of the year, Severus. As well as everything there is he needs to know about the rest of his family.” He answered, nodding his finality in his decision.

Lucius sneered mockingly at that, shaking his head.

“Then I should hope, Dumbledore, that you have not just sentenced all of us to the wrath of another future deranged dark lord.” He stated simply, a rather mocking tone laced in his voice.

Albus met his look with a tight but answering smile. “Unlike Tom, Lucius, Harry has a sister. A best friend—your son. More importantly, he is in love. He is far from the path Tom Riddle had chosen.”

“Love...You mean the mudblood?” Lucius smirked but Dumbledore leveled him with a sharp, piercing blue eyes.

“Love knows no boundaries, Lucius. House *or* Blood. You once believed this yourself, if I remember correctly. In your fourth year...with a charming young girl named Alice Hinkleman.” Dumbledore reminded him, his blue eyes twinkling in amusement.

Lucius’ eyes darkened to a stormy gray, his facial features contorting with unkempt anger. “Don’t mention her name to me again, Dumbledore. She was a two-timing, deceitful coward. I’ve put her behind me completely.” He responded, returning Dumbledore’s comment with a cold smile.

Snape smirked, faintly remembering the scandal it had ensued upon the Hogwarts population at the time. “Would you like to know how her son is doing at Hogwarts?” He asked nonchalantly, noticing the way the blonde man clenched his jaw in frustration.

“That half-brained idiot? He takes after his dim-witted father exactly, from what I’ve heard...Causes all sorts of mishaps during potions...Excels in *Herbology*, the most useless of subjects. Nowhere near in comparison to my Draco.” Lucius answered haughtily, a triumphant gleam in his eye.

“It was never a competition, Lucius. Nevertheless...Your failed relationship with Alice was a rather amusing ordeal, if I do say so myself.” He agreed, recalling how Lucius Malfoy—one of the most popular boys in school in their time—had been particularly fond of the petite, brown-haired Hufflepuff.

Lucius returned the look with his own mocking smile, his eyes cold as they fixed upon Snape’s smirking face. “Yes...Almost as amusing as you trailing after your best friend and fellow Slytherin Lily Evans for seven years only to have her marry pretty boy Gryffindor James Potter.”

At that comment, it was Snape's turn to snarl, flashing Lucius one of his more deadly glares.

"Do you notice how Harry is extremely like her? Or is that why you're so close to him...? You feel that to be close to Harry is almost being close to her...And that by earning his trust and respect, you could almost pretend he was *your* son?" Lucius continued to mock, enjoying Snape's dangerously tensing features.

"Lucius..."

The elder Malfoy carried on, pointedly ignoring Dumbledore's warning.

"I take it you've harbored a soft spot for AJ too, have you Severus? She looks exactly like Lily doesn't she...? Minus the black hair from Potter of course. But then again, you don't want to be as close to her as you are to Harry seeing that she is more like her father in nature than her mother. It kills you to see her face in AJ...doesn't it?" Lucius drawled on, unblinking as he spoke the harsh words.

"Lucius, stop it."

"Is that why you've switched sides, Severus? Because you wanted to be more like the man Lily—the woman you loved—fell in love with?" Lucius finished, his eyes narrowed at the murderous expression in Snape's eyes.

Seething with fury, Snape managed to speak—his voice convulsing slightly. "Whatever happens, *Malfoy*... I would never dare do to Lily Evans what you yourself have done to Alice. Never. No matter *who* she chose over me."

At that Lucius remained silent, his eyes clouding over in barely masked pain and sorrow as he heard the memories beginning to flood his mind.

"Stop it. Both of you."

Both men blinked and looked up at the exhausted face of Albus Dumbledore, who was already standing, glancing briefly at his pocket watch.

“I am afraid, gentlemen...that we have worn each other out with this unprecedented meeting.” He concluded, nodding to both of them as both men managed to compose themselves and returned the acknowledgment.

Dumbledore turned to Lucius, giving the man a patient smile.

“Lucius...I expect to hear more news from you soon. Keep at your apparent loyalty to Lord Voldemort. We do not want to arouse any suspicion. The same goes for you, Severus. I trust the both of you with the lives of the children we so passionately protect. Be safe.” He told them, his voice gathering much strength.

Just as he and Snape turned to walk back into Hogwarts castle, however, Lucius called out to them from where he stood.

“Albus.”

The elder wizard turned around slowly, raising his eyebrows at the dark expression the blonde man was directing at him.

“If you don’t tell him soon...*I will.*”

With that, Lucius smirked and disappeared with a soft pop—vanishing into the dark night and leaving an apprehensive old man to his thoughts.

“*Petunia!* Where is that freak and his sister? If their weird friend is anywhere near my son, I’m kicking them out of the house no matter what that old man says!”

Harry gave a derisive snort upon hearing Vernon Dursley’s voice booming from the window behind him. From where he was laying on a bed of flowers just outside the Dursleys’ kitchen, he rolled over onto his back and stared up at the sky above him.

Tucking both of his palms behind his head, he shifted himself to a more comfortable position, reveling in the events that had happened within the past few days.

Hermione and AJ had left for the evening for the shopping mall near their neighborhood, both girls attired in their favorite muggle clothing and chattering excitedly as they left the house after breakfast. Their efforts to persuade him to come had been useless as Harry blatantly refused the whole way through—stating bluntly that there was nothing amusing about a mall filled with muggles.

With that, both girls left Harry to muse by himself—the Slytherin taking the opportunity to reflect upon everything that had happened—as well as everything he *planned* to happen in their upcoming fifth year.

He knew of numerous campaigns of students against him around Hogwarts—he had heard it from his fellow housemates at Draco's birthday party. As soon as he entered Hogwarts, he was almost positive several students would be plotting against him—believing him to have killed Cedric Diggory and to be lying about Voldemort.

He couldn't really blame them. Even *he* didn't seem to believe himself at times. Everything in his memory, from the time it had actually happened, had begun to blur in his mind—infused with images from his dreams that he had difficulty distinguishing his dreams from the events that had actually happened.

He saw himself, looming over Cedric's body with a maniacal smile on his face. He saw Voldemort as his reflection, smiling back at him with the same look of evil in his eyes. He saw Cedric...rising from the dead...Blaming him for his murder.

Harry shook his head violently, clearing the images out of his mind.

It was happening again.

He was disturbed now. Usually those images had only invaded his thoughts when he was asleep—while he was dreaming. Now they were attacking him even in broad daylight when he was wide awake.

With only one week left before school started, he couldn't afford to stay like this—unfocused and distracted from the responsibilities he had to face. He had to get a hold of himself. He had been a mess ever since the night he came back from the TriWizarding tournament

maze, carrying a dead Cedric in his arms and screaming of the return of Lord Voldemort.

Harry blinked, closing his eyes for a brief minute before opening them again.

One week of summer left. Get yourself together, Potter.

He took a deep breath and opened his eyes again, this time catching a glimpse of Mrs. Figg, an elderly, strangely batty cat-loving woman from Wisteria Walk passing by. She eyed him briefly before continuing on her way, oblivious to the smirk Harry sent her as she passed.

“Where *is* my son, anyway?” Vernon’s raspy voice broke through Harry’s reverie, snapping the Slytherin back to his senses as he rolled his eyes in annoyance.

“Oh he’s out for tea at the Polkiss’. You know how our Dudley is so popular...” Petunia answered sweetly, much to Harry’s loud snort as an image of Dudley drinking tea with his gang of large, dim-witted bullies.

As Harry found himself taking occasional walks at night around the neighborhood—particularly within Little Whinging—he was always amused whenever he would catch a glimpse of Dudley with his muggle friends.

When the large boy wasn’t secretly smoking in a dark alley near the streets, he and his friends entertained themselves with more mundane activities such as throwing stones at passing cars, bullying little children and even vandalizing sidewalks.

Harry had always watched them from a distance, chuckling and shaking his head before he walked away to search for newspapers for any news of the Wizarding world’s current state.

He was always desperate for news about the Wizarding society. Even now, as he lay down in the garden, he listened intently to the muggle radio that was playing in the background of the Dursleys’ bantering lest it report *any* relevant news at all related to Voldemort.

It was always the same story of course. Useless news would come on about some random muggle events Harry didn't care about and Vernon would make an equally useless comment just as Harry's stomach would unclench at hearing—*once again*—how nothing was happening.

Hermione's presence had made it all easier for him somehow, though he wasn't particularly happy when he had learned that Hermione had canceled her subscription to the daily prophet before arriving in privet drive.

A long argument had followed after that, ending only with a sincere apology from Hermione and a sigh on Harry's part—both teenagers agreeing to sleep the argument away.

Harry smirked as he remembered his relatives' reaction upon seeing Hermione for the first time.

The Dursleys weren't particularly comfortable with the idea of Hermione sleeping with Harry in one room but one look from the Slytherin had silenced their protests immediately, their eyes riveting on the wand held tightly in Harry's fist.

Hermione wasn't exactly pleased with the sleeping arrangements either, believing the predicament to be rather improper and convincing Harry with her opinion until the Slytherin finally agreed to sleep on a laid-out mattress on the floor, allowing Hermione to likewise sleep on the bed.

Harry wasn't exactly happy with this at first. However, most nights, Hermione would wake up and move over to snuggle with him under the covers on the mattress until the both of them fell into a deep sleep—reveling in the body warmth of the other. This silenced any protests on his parts, especially since they spend a lot of those nights discovering the different ways to make out in silence without being heard the Dursleys or AJ, who was sleeping in the next room.

More than that, however, what Harry enjoyed the most from having Hermione staying with them was the physical intimacy of their intertwined bodies right after—Holding Hermione's warm body so

close to his own and watching her eyes flutter softly as she began to fall into a deep sleep.

He loved their mornings best of all—waking up into the loving, smiling face of the girl beside him and realizing she had spent the night entangled in his arms. Harry loved that feeling more than anything he had ever experienced in this world. He could only hope these past weeks he spent with her would never end...That he could continue living in this surreal fantasy where the dangers of reality would never reach him.

Watching the most important women in his life together those past few days—Hermione and AJ—both of which with happy smiles on their faces as they tended to Asch, Harry felt an uneasy feeling of foreboding wash over him.

He just felt so...*angry*. All the time. Day by day, his anger consumed him— eating him up until he wanted to destroy something.

He usually did, of course— venting out his frustrations on any pitiful object he could find behind the alleys of Little Whinging. None of it helped, however, and for some reason, it only seemed to fuel his anger more.

Harry buried his face in his hands, taking a long deep breath. If anything, he hated the fact that he had no control over his actions. He had no control over his anger. Rather, his anger controlled him. And it was only a matter of time.

He would never be able to enjoy the simplest moments of watching them both again. Never again would they be this happy—this carefree.

Something was out to hurt AJ *and* Hermione. He was almost sure it was going to be him. He knew it was only a matter of time before the war began to consume them all. It was only a matter of time before the war consumed *him*.

And somehow...through all this. He knew that whatever it was...It was waiting for them. This year. In Hogwarts.

Harry sighed again, tuning out of his thoughts just in time to hear the radio inside commenting about *water-skiing budgerigars*.

“Great. Budgerigars. Nothing else worth waiting for now.” He muttered, rolling his eyes and easily hoisted himself up into a seating position. Pausing to make sure his relatives weren’t aware of his presence, he was just about to raise himself up when a loud gunshot nearby caught his attention.

Eyes alert, Harry instantly clamped his hand on the wand tucked inside his pocket and hoisted himself up, his eyes scanning the area. A cat had screeched and dashed from under one of the nearby cars around the same time he heard a loud scream and breaking of china from inside the Dursley’s kitchen.

Harry narrowed his eyes, the green orbs alert and suspicious. He barely had time to avoid a painful injury as he managed to slam one hand against the kitchen window Petunia had shoved open behind him, successfully evading the onslaught.

He was just about to rush forward towards the direction the gunshot had come from when he felt a large hand clamp around his throat, yanking him back against the open window.

“Put that vile thing away! Before anyone sees it!” Vernon snarled into his ear, causing the Slytherin to clench his fists in anger.

“Vernon... How dare you defile me with these filthy sausages...” He drawled calmly, his green eyes darkening in anger.

Before the older man could say anything else, Harry slowly placed a hand over the large one Vernon had around his throat and—in a quick fluid motion—easily twisted away from his neck, causing Vernon to bellow in pain.

“You ungrateful child!” His Uncle screamed, lunging for Harry again but this time Harry anticipated it and turned around, ducking just in time for Vernon to trip ungracefully out of the window onto the garden outside their house.

Laughing slightly in amusement, Harry turned around, noticing the curious face of all their muggle neighbors peering out of their windows at them. Smiling graciously, he waved at them all—carefully tucking his wand back into his pocket.

“Lovely morning. I’m afraid my large, overweight Uncle just had a rather nasty tumble right after he caught me setting off some fireworks. So sorry for the disturbance.” The Slytherin drawled easily, flashing them all a charming, easy-going smile.

Their neighbors looked a bit unsatisfied but nodded in understanding before walking back into their houses with loud mutters about how much of a handsome young man Vernon’s nephew was becoming.

Smirking once more, Harry turned to his beet-red Uncle struggling to hoist himself up. “I believe you owe me for that one, Dursley.” He commented casually, turning around just in time to see Petunia’s horsey face peering out of the kitchen window.

Seething with anger, Vernon walked up to him, mirroring the same livid expression on Petunia’s face. “What in the devil’s name did you mean by it, boy? Making a pistol-sound right outside our house?!” He snarled, his large eyes bulging out of its sockets.

Recoiling in slight disgust, Harry took a step back and raised a defiant eyebrow at the accusation. “Believe me, Vernon...Had I wanted to humiliate you and your family, I would have chosen something much more creative than a simple gunshot. I didn’t make that noise.” He responded, his eyes narrowed.

“Then what were you doing outside our window?” Petunia screeched, causing Harry to wince at the pitch of her voice.

“I was listening to the news.” He answered calmly, much to both adult’s shock and confusion.

“The news? *Again?*!”

“Well you see, that’s the thing Petunia. I think the news changes everyday... Doesn’t it?” Harry replied sarcastically, giving them a sneer.

“Don’t you get smart with your Aunt, boy! Why the hell would you be interested in *our* news?” Vernon spat out, his voice lowering to a whisper.

Harry’s sneer widened into a smile. “To see if there have been any muggle killings lately.” He answered simply, causing his relatives to recoil in horror.

Vernon sputtered his next sentence. “Wha-What?! If there *have* been any killings, boy, it wouldn’t be related to *your* lot—”

“That’s what *you* think.”

“Shut up! You get enough news from your bloody owls anyway! Why the bloody hell would you need to listen to *ours*?” Vernon demanded, a triumphant look in his eyes as he believed to have cornered Harry with his question.

“Yes, Potter. We’re not stupid, you know!” Petunia agreed, glaring at Harry from the window with her hands on her hips.

Harry mockingly widened his eyes, a sardonic smile on his lips.

“Oh really? Well *that’s* certainly the most riveting news I’ve received all day.” He commented, giving his irate relatives one last look of derision before he turned around and set off into the street, ignoring the angry shouts they called after him.

He wasn’t going to waste any time explaining to them what the source of that noise had been. He *knew* it was the sound of someone apparating nearby. He had no idea if the sound had been intended to warn him or if the person was lurking nearby, watching him.

Whatever the case was, he knew he had to get out of there. He knew better than to openly wait for a probable attack when he was alone in a muggle environment. If he was lucky, the sound had only been the sound of a busted tire.

He didn’t know how far long he had begun walking towards an unknown direction as once again, he tuned himself into his deep thoughts about the year ahead of him.

Draco was right. Dumbledore is an idiot. Harry thought to himself, his eyes narrowed in anger at the secrecy he could feel emanating from the older wizard.

The man had isolated him and his sister to a muggle community where they were openly vulnerable and unaware of anything that happened in the Wizarding world. Harry wouldn't be surprised if it was Dumbledore himself who had sent a wizard apparating in here to spy on him. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if the man had been doing that every summer.

His loyalty with Dumbledore was over. That he was completely sure of. If anything, Harry had no intentions of talking with Dumbledore about anything that had happened during the previous year.

This year would be all about forming his *own* alliance. He had already sent the necessary invitations to a few select Slytherin – Ravenclaw students in his year as well as others from the years above them.

The choices were far from final of course. He and Draco planned to call a general assembly for all they had invited after the welcoming feast in Hogwarts. The meeting would be held at night— in one of Salazar Slytherin's private chambers.

Although initially, Harry had guised it in the form of an acquaintance party for all those invited to join the alliance, the assembly would focus on each of the different potentials talking to him or Draco personally about their loyalties—after which important decisions can be made about whether or not they were fit to join them in the upcoming war.

Their abilities, however, would also be drawn into question. Once the potentials have been established from the general assembly, each one will individually square off against the Slytherin duo in a wizard's duel as a final test of their magical and combat capabilities.

Harry thought carefully to himself, shoving his hands inside his pockets.

The duel was relatively simple— survive for three minutes. Once they've completed the task, they were of course—welcomed into the

fold while those that failed to accomplish the task were given the memory charm and sent away with no recollection of the entire experience.

All other forms of formalities were yet to be determined later on. All that mattered to Harry at the moment was finding the necessary people who supported his cause in all this. After which, the real war would begin.

Blinking, Harry broke away from his thoughts just as he reached the deserted playground in the neighborhood park. Sighing, he hopped over the vaulted gate and walked over to the nearby swing, plopping himself distractedly on it.

He was just about to fall into another long lapse of silence when his thoughts were broken by the approaching sound of someone singing a rather crude song, followed by echoing bouts of laughter.

Harry sneered to himself, his eyes narrowing in irritation.

Dudley.

In mild amusement, he watched as Dudley's group of hulking gorillas crossed the street, their boisterous laughter echoing loudly in the silence of the environment around the park.

His face masked carefully, he kept perfectly still— almost daring Dudley in his mind to approach him if he wanted a real scare in his life. He knew for a fact that his witless group of friends would head directly for him if given the chance. His cousin, however, would hold off as much as he can— terrified of any direct confrontation with the cousin who had once set his clothes on fire.

Observing the group of boys approaching the playground leisurely, Harry couldn't help snorting at how huge his cousin had become over the years. As Vernon had delightedly boasted to anyone who had the guts to listen, Dudley had easily gone from a hulking glob of useless flesh to the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast.

As it would seem, the sport had made Dudley more threatening physically to the children in their neighborhood than Harry had ever observed in the past. Children literally scampered at the sight of the huge boy much like they were frightened of Harry as the toughened gangster who attended St. Brutus' school for disciplinary action.

What a charming family we make then. He thought, smirking slightly to himself.

Just as they neared him, Harry found himself resisting the urge to call their attention. He felt particularly in the mood for a good fight right now but he decided against it, knowing it would probably be a reckless move on his part.

They were just muggles after all.

He waited for a long moment for them to disappear from his line of vision before he shot up and stretched, rubbing his eyes with his hands.

Maybe I'll take a cold shower to relax. He thought, yawning to himself before slowly walking out of the playground. He had walked a good couple of meters before he was once again greeted with the sight of his cousin walking leisurely a couple of feet in front of him.

Fighting the urge to smile, Harry carefully ducked behind a nearby tree and watched as Dudley waved goodbye to his friends just as they approached the entrance to Magnolia Crescent.

"...Squealed like a pig, didn't he?" Guffawed a large robust kid Harry only knew as one of their neighbors, Malcolm.

"Nice right hook, Big D." Piers added, clapping Dudley on the back as the two of them burst into amused sniggers.

"Same time tomorrow?" Dudley asked, looking around and exchanging high fives with the boys around him.

"Sure. Around my place— my parents are out." Another kid named Gordon replied, giving Dudley a big grin just as he and the others began rounding the corner.

“Alright, see you then!”

Dudley watched them walk away silently, waiting until they had gone from his sight before he finally turned and began walking into Magnolia Crescent. He was humming a soundless tune when Harry had finally caught up to him, clapping the large boy noisily on his back.

“Heya, *Big D!*” He greeted cheerfully, stopping to walk in step with him just as Dudley froze and gave him a terrified look, his large eyes widening in suspicion.

“It’s *you!* How long have you been there?” Dudley blurted out, stepping cautiously away from Harry as he eyed the boy fearfully.

Harry smirked, gesturing towards the direction Dudley’s friends had gone. “How long have *you* been *Big D*? How many ten-year-olds did you beat up to earn *that* nickname?” He mocked, laughing to himself.

Dudley shook slightly in anger but said nothing, walking with his shoulders tensed and his hands clenched into fists.

“Aw, but don’t worry about it cousin. You’ll always be *Ickle Diddykins* to me.” Harry mocked further, smirking wider when he saw Dudley’s face begin to darken an angry red.

“SHUT IT, POTTER!”

Harry grinned. He knew he had hit his mark but this was all too fun to resist.

“I’m sorry... Your friends don’t know Petunia calls you that, do they?” He asked, raising his eyebrows curiously.

“Shut your face before I do it for you.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed, the amused smirk on his face easily transforming into a derisive sneer.

“You don’t talk to your mother like that, do you? How about *popkins* or *Dinky Diddydums...*? Do your friends know about *that*?” Harry pressed further, his green eyes glinting maliciously.

Dudley was literally shaking with anger, his walking slightly rigid as he fought with all of his self-control to keep from punching Harry.

“So...Who have you beaten up tonight anyway? Another ten-year-old, I’m sure... I know *you* beat up that kid across from us the other day even though people thought it was *me*—”

“He was asking for it, the little loser.” Dudley snarled at him, turning to give him an angry glare.

“How so?”

“He cheeked me—”

“Called you a pig, huh? I hate to tell you Dudley but that bit was actually true... Whoops. Now you’re going to have to beat me up too now huh?” Harry interrupted, a mocking sneer on his face as he found enjoying directing all of his anger onto Dudley, his only outlet of frustration the entire summer.

It wasn’t that Dudley had done anything wrong— only the fact that he was simply in the wrong place at the right time.

He watched as a muscle twitched in Dudley’s jaw, signaling the Slytherin to cease his taunting but somehow, he was enjoying this all too much. He whistled cheerfully to himself as they turned right down a narrow alleyway— the same one Harry had first seen Sirius in his third year.

Unfortunately, the alley had no streetlamps and was much darker than both boys would have liked. Listening to their muffled footsteps, Harry reveled in the sudden silence between them as it seemed to pacify his anger temporarily.

The silence was broken however when Dudley spoke again, his voice an angry threatening growl. “Think you’re so invincible carrying that

thing with you all the time, don't you?" He snarled, drawing Harry's gaze to him cautiously.

"This thing?" Harry asked, pulling the glossy lacquer case containing his phoenix-feathered wand out of his pocket. He had decided to use the anonymously sent present he had received, enjoying the added intimidation it seemed to wrap around his wand.

Dudley eyed it cautiously, his eyes widening in slight fear and trepidation.

"What's that symbol?" He asked, his eyes fixated upon the silver figure situated near the wand case's handle.

Harry grinned again, this time his eyes gleaming maniacally.

"It's my family crest, Dudley... Family crests have been a Wizarding tradition ever since the start of our time...Of course muggles like you wouldn't really know much about that." He replied, tucking his wand back into his pocket.

"You couldn't take me without that thing with you, Potter."

"Right.. Whereas you can't take on a ten-year-old without your group of friends right behind you. Which reminds me... That boxing champion title of yours...? How old was your opponent really...? Seven or eight?" Harry drawled easily, yawning.

"He was *sixteen*, Potter. Twice as heavy as you are. Just wait till I tell dad you brought that thing out again."

Harry snorted, rolling his eyes.

"Right...Go tell *Vernon* and watch *him* scamper away from me in fear." He retorted, a derisive look on his face.

Dudley sneered back, his bottom lip curling.

"You're one to talk about fear, Potter... Always whimpering in your sleep at night...I hear you sometimes, you know. Does your *girlfriend*

or skinny sister know about *Cedric*?' He mocked, laughing as Harry turned to him in surprise.

"What?!"

"You heard me. You moan in your sleep... *Don't kill Cedric! Don't kill him!* Who's Cedric— your boyfriend?" Dudley asked, sniggering to himself just as Harry's eyes flashed dangerously in anger.

"You lying bastard."

He knew Dudley was telling the truth. He couldn't believe he had been talking in his sleep about Cedric's death... Hermione *nor* AJ hadn't told him about it although he suspected both girls didn't want him knowing in the first place. He *was*, however, pissed off at the fact that it had been Dudley who had told him. For that, Harry felt his anger seethe slowly through his veins.

"Dad, he's going to kill me! No! Help me, please! Dad!" Dudley continued, laughing harder when Harry's face contorted slowly with anger, his hands slowly reaching for the wand in his pocket.

"Dad, help me! Mum! Dad! Help— *KEEP THAT AWAY FROM ME, POTTER!*"

Dudley fell back noisily onto the ground, his eyes fixated on the wand Harry was now directing at his heart.

"Shut...up..." Harry managed to seethe out, his hand shaking furiously as he unhooked the case from his wand. His eyes were slowly turning a darker shade of green.

The larger boy backed away further, screaming in fear when he noticed Harry's eyes flash a violent shade of crimson.

"*What the bloody hell is wrong with your eyes?! You freak! Keep away from me! Help! Someone, help me!*"

"Don't...ever...talk about that again...Do you understand me? *DUDLEY?!*" Harry whispered softly, his eyes now glowing a vibrant shade of scarlet and his face twisted into a terrifying snake-like snarl.

“POINT THAT THING SOMEWHERE ELSE!”

“Answer me.”

“KEEP THAT AWAY!”

Harry was visibly shaking violently, his eyes completely transfixed—the orbs infused with a twinge of what Dudley could only observe as malevolent anger.

Trembling in fear, he backed away until he felt himself pressed against the cold wall behind him, paling in complete terror as he watched Harry’s feet slowly being lifted off the ground—the tip of his feet scraping the ground as they dangled, suspended in mid-air.

“Take...it... back...” Harry hissed, his voice issuing out like that of a serpent’s hiss, echoing in the silence of the dark alley.

“H-Harry... I-I’m sorry.. Point that thing somewhere else... Keep away from me, *please*...” Dudley sobbed, turning his face away from the frightening sight.

The boy stopped however with a sharp gasp, his eyes suddenly rolling up to the back of his head as the night suddenly seemed to darken with the arrival of a sharp gust of air as cold as ice.

Harry collapsed onto the ground, shaking his head to clear his thoughts away. He blinked, trying to remember what had just happened but he didn’t have much time to dwell on his thoughts as he looked up into the night sky, his green eyes narrowing in suspicion when he noticed dark clouds forming on the horizon.

“...Dudley...” He warned carefully. He turned to look at the flower pots up on the apartment windows overlooking the alley, watching as one by one the flower petals began to shrivel up amidst the icy fog descending upon the darkness of the night.

Backing away slowly, his hand tightened on his wand again just as he looked up into the sky.

He knew exactly what was going on. He could only hope he was wrong. Not here. Not in Little Whinging.

Dementors... He thought with a sickening dread, wishing more than anything that he had AJ and Hermione with him.

“Dudley... Back away.”

His cousin neither heard nor understood him as the large boy simply whimpered and scampered behind him, his eyes searching frantically around him.

“What’s happening?! What are you doing?! I’m blind!” He stuttered, his voice cracking but Harry didn’t answer.

“Lumos.”

Keeping his form perfectly still, he searched the sky and the surroundings with his wand, his muscles tensed perfectly in case of any sudden movements or attacks directed towards them.

“Stop it, Potter! I swear to god—”

Neither boy had any time to react, however, as a large cloaked figure suddenly swooped down on both of them from the dark night sky, its grotesque mouth aiming directly at Harry.

“Dudley, *move!*”

Harry ducked the dementor’s onslaught and shot a spell at his cousin— effectively jerking the larger boy out of the way just before another dementor had lunged for him.

Dudley screamed and scrambled to his feet, running furiously away from Harry into the exit of the alley they had come from.

“Dudley, you idiot! You’re heading directly for it!” Harry yelled furiously at him, making to run after him but stopping when a dementor had lunged for him again, this time running through him and casting the dark curse Harry had become so familiar with in his third year.

“No! Not my children! Don’t kill them, please!”

Mother... Harry thought painfully, dropping his wand and collapsing weakly onto the ground.

He felt like dying. He wanted to die. Right then and there, he wanted to die.

He wanted it all to end.

“Lily, take the twins and go! I’ll hold him off... Go!”

“James...Be careful...”

No.... Get up... Not like this. I won’t...die like this. He thought to himself, frantically scavenging the dirt-covered ground for any trace of the wand he had dropped upon collapsing onto the floor.

He heard Dudley screaming several feet away from him, drowning his ears as he fought to keep a straight head amidst the other voices flooding his mind.

“Tom, please! Don’t kill my children! Please!”

“Stand aside, Lily...”

“No!!”

Harry clenched his eyes shut in pain, shaking his head furiously to clear away the thoughts.

Wand...Must find my wand... He thought in hopeless desperation, nearly collapsing once again as the dementor swooping in on him once more, effectively turning his vision into a blur of black and gray.

“Lumos.” He muttered, nearly cursing in gratitude when the tip of his wand ignited just a few inches from his right hand. Snatching it off the ground, he hopped unsteadily to his feet, squinting in the darkness.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Harry nearly collapsed onto the ground again as a weak silver stag erupted from his wand, managing to block Harry from the dementor for a good couple of moments but otherwise fading into the dark night.

No...Think of something happy... Think! Harry thought desperately to himself, his face contorting in pain as the dementor began nearing him once more, its hands reaching out for him almost hungrily.

Something happy...? A cynical voice seemed to respond in his head and he found himself collapsing slowly onto his knees, his vision revolving violently in a mass of blurry images he could no longer make out.

Help me...

Some part of his mind watched in resignation as another dementor descended upon him, its cold breath causing him to recoil in both disgust and terror.

“EXPECTO...E-EXPECTO...” He stammered helplessly, falling into his knees as he was slowly consumed by the screams of his mother echoing listlessly in his head. Dying. For him. Over and over.

“ARGH...PLEASE...STOP...”

A vision of Hermione’s laughing face burst into his mind, her brown eyes sparkling with laughter as she leaned over and gave him a gentle kiss.

“I love you, Harry.”

Harry opened his eyes, a surge of strength propelling him forward as he rose unsteadily to his feet and raised his wand, pointing it directly at where the dementor would have its heart. The creature felt his burst of courage and began to back away slowly.

“*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*”

Once again, a bright silver stag—the brightest and most beautiful it had ever appeared to Harry—erupted the tip of his wand and rushed through the dark alley, charging itself right at the dementor in front of

him. The creature stumbled as though it had been brutally wounded and flew off in alarm, leaving an exhausted Harry staggering to his feet.

As though a spell had been lifted, the misty fog around him slowly began to dissolve— clearing the darkness and finally allowing him to see the surroundings of Magnolia Crescent. He took a long gulp of the muggle neighborhood's odor-filled air, reveling in the life that seemed to revive around him.

Dementors... What were they doing here? Were they looking for me?! He thought, his mind filled with a multitude of questions that seemed to draw him into more obscurity.

Does Dumbledore know about this?! Was I supposed to die tonight?! He thought furiously, coughing to clear the lump that had formed in his throat.

Voldemort... The dementors are working for Voldemort... Then that means it's only a matter of time before the whole of Azkaban... Harry cursed under his breath, refusing to finish his trail of thought.

I have to get back... There might still be more of them... Where's...that lump— DUDLEY! Harry's eyes widened in alarm and he looked around the alleyway. There was no trace of his overweight cousin anywhere.

Breathing heavily, he struggled to catch his breath as he inspected his surroundings more carefully, his eyes squinting in the darkness. Then, a frown marring his features, he called out into the dark, silent night.

"DUDLEY?!"

No response.

Harry's frown deepened. He got to his feet and started walking in the direction his cousin ran towards, driven more by a sense of annoyance rather than agitation for his cousin's welfare.

"DUDLEY!!"

He froze right in front of the alleyway's entrance, his eyes widening in alarm at the scene that greeted him. Dudley was kneeling on the ground in front of another dementor, his eyes rolling up into the back of his head and a spittle slowly trickling down his chin.

Harry watched in shock as the dementor leaned in to administer its infamous kiss, its putrid mouth opening like that of a black hole ready to devour Dudley's soul. Dudley gurgled insensibly, his eyes devoid of any sign of life or resistance.

"DUDLEY, YOU FOOL!" Harry shouted furiously at him, yanking his wand out of his pocket. "EXPECTO PATRONUM!" He held his wand tightly in his fists and watched the animagus form of his father hurtle through, driving the dementor attacking his cousin away and disappearing as it rounded the corner.

Shaking his head in dismay, Harry walked towards Dudley cautiously, his green eyes inspecting the larger boy's features. Dudley continued to remain kneeling on the ground, his expression never changing.

Harry raised a single finger and poked Dudley on the shoulder, eliciting a mere gurgle of response. Sighing, he knelt down beside him, peering into his rolled-back eyes.

"Give me one good indication you're alive. Otherwise, I'm going to leave you here." He threatened loudly but to his surprise, Dudley didn't seem to hear him. The boy continued to gurgle to himself, making Harry extremely uncomfortable.

He tucked his wand back into his pocket and stood up, debating with himself whether or not he had the courtesy of bringing Dudley back to Privet Drive. He was interrupted, however, when he heard the echo of a soft footstep, immediately causing him to snap his head back around him.

"Who's there? If there are more of out there, come and get me. I'm right here!" He shouted furiously, his eyes darkening as his hand reached for the wand in his pocket once more.

He heard an answering scuffle right before he was greeted with the pale, ghostly face of the elderly woman Harry only recognized as their muggle neighbor and childhood babysitter *Arabella Figg*.

Ignoring the look of utter confusion on the Slytherin's face, Mrs. Figg looked around the alley suspiciously and gestured to the wand in his pocket, his face looking grim and troubled.

"Keep your wand out, Harry. There might be more of them out there."

"Mother?"

Resting luxuriously in one of the prestigious libraries of Malfoy Manor, Narcissa Malfoy hastily blinked her tears away at the sound of her son's voice. She dabbed at the wetness under her blue eyes and plastered a smile on her face just before she turned to meet Draco's worried gaze.

"Draco, love. What's wrong?" She asked, sniffing softly but otherwise offering her son a small smile and patting the seat beside her on the elegant white couch. Draco narrowed his eyes in query as he watched her shaking hands hurriedly clearing the disarray of thick photo albums scattered on the table in front of her.

"Nothing, mother...I... What were you— were you *crying*?" Draco asked in concern, slowly sitting down next to her and taking in the scruffiness of his mother's usually immaculate eyes and made up features.

Narcissa forced a light laugh, shaking her head hastily and waving the thought away. "Oh don't be ridiculous, Draco. I was...merely rifling through some old pictures of your father and I. And of course, as women are prone to...I got a bit nostalgic and teary-eyed. I'm perfectly fine." She assured him, leaning over and planting a gentle kiss on Draco's forehead.

Draco nodded and allowed a small smile in return, resting his cheek affectionately against his mother's shoulder as she wrapped both her arms around him in a motherly embrace.

“Alright. I’m sorry... I’ve just been worried. You’ve been spending a lot of time up here by yourself... Staring off into space. You look sad...Is there something you want to tell me?” He asked her, relaxing as he felt her tenderly caressing the strands of his hair.

Narcissa’s eyes were unfocused however as she stared off into space, her hands absentmindedly stroking her son’s mane of blonde hair. “I’m fine, my son. I’ve just been very tired...and worried about the danger your father has been placing himself in.” She managed to say, her eyes masking the words she truly wished to tell him.

Draco nodded, pulling his head back and giving her a small smile of comfort.

“Very well, I shall go upstairs to my room to pack my trunk. Are you...sure you’re going to be alright...?” He asked her again, his silver eyes peering directly into hers.

Narcissa sighed, turning away as she saw her husband’s own affection emanating from the concern in her son’s gaze.

“Yes, Draco. I’ll be okay.”

Draco smiled and gave her one last peck on the cheek before rising from his seat and walking slowly out of the room, leaving Narcissa staring after him.

“Every family has its skeletons in the closet. We’ll be okay. Nobody has to know...”

Narcissa closed her eyes, softly muttering her words over and over again.

“Nobody has to know.”

A/N: No, Voldemort is **NOT** Harry’s father. Nor is he Draco’s. Just to clarify to those who might be getting the wrong signals. No offense to other authors but that plot line is just way too overdone for me. Just had to make sure you’re all aware of that. I don’t want any confusion. And **YES**, Lily **was** a Slytherin. At least in **MY** fic. Haha.

Btw, by now you should have noticed that the most important part of this entire chapter was the conversation between Lucius, Snape and Dumbledore. A lot of important insights from the plot can be derived from their exchange, as well as the image I want people to understand regarding Slytherin house in my story.

In the AAA series, Slytherin is **NOT** equal to evil. They are merely ambitious and derisive but never evil. **PLEASE** keep that in mind. All will be explained eventually.

Lastly, I apologize if I wasn't able to write about Grimmauld place or the prefect positions in this chapter. I had to write these out first as they are integral to the plot development. They will **SURELY** appear in the next chapter, along with a few more surprises.

PLEASE REVIEW!

Chapter 4 –Conspicuous Intervention

A soft knock roused a silently brooding Slytherin from his thoughts, causing him to blink and look up just as the door to his dark bedroom swung open, revealing a familiar, worried face.

“Harry...? Your dinner’s going to get cold, love...” Hermione whispered softly into the dark room, her brown eyes resting on Harry’s still figure for a long time as she awaited his response.

Harry merely blinked once more and buried his head under the covers of his bed. It was another ten minutes of Hermione watching him before he allowed himself to speak, his voice a hollow monotone that seemed to echo in the silence of the room.

“I’m not hungry.”

Hermione bit her lip, her movements hesitating.

“But... Harry... You haven’t eaten anything today... Just a piece of bread at least. Please...?” She tried to reason, watching as the Slytherin grunted in response and shook his head once more, obviously irritated.

He waited for a long moment until Hermione seemed to finally give up and closed the door, leaving Harry to his thoughts once more. Once he heard her soft footsteps fading away down the stairs, he threw the covers off himself again, folding his hands behind his head as he stared into the dark ceiling.

He was angry.

He didn’t understand what was happening.

No one was telling him what was happening.

That night—when the dementors had attacked him—he had felt something. He had *done* something wrong and it angered him that no matter how much he tried to recall what was happening, he couldn’t fill in the missing pieces in his head.

More than anything else, he had absolutely *no clear idea* as to how the dementors could have ever found a muggle area like *Privet Drive*, much less *why* they were there in the first place.

The Dursleys had been livid when Harry had brought Dudley home that night, both of them staggering and Dudley's eyes rolling backwards to the back of his head as though he was in a state of shock. Vernon had rushed at Harry then, punching him in the jaw in fury while Petunia had collapsed into hysterical tears, clutching her quivering son to her as though he were her life supply.

Mrs. Figg, whom apparently Harry had never known was actually a squib living as their neighbor, had reasoned with the Dursleys and had explained the situation as a mob ambush by a group of drunken teenagers on the street. Since Harry made no attempt to clarify the matter further and Dudley was obviously incapable of telling what had really happened, the Dursleys had accepted this reason and had rushed Dudley off to the nearest Psychiatric hospital.

Harry had stayed behind with Mrs. Figg, who stayed with him and tended to his wounds until AJ and Hermione had returned—both girls exploding hysterically at the sight of Harry and at what had happened.

As soon as Mrs. Figg had calmly told the girls what had happened, Harry began to drown everything out and it was after a good fifteen minutes that he finally fell into a deep sleep, completely devoid of everything else around him.

When the Dursleys had returned home, the atmosphere around the house was as tense and awkward as ever.

None of the Dursleys spoke to the two girls or Harry and while it seemed Dudley had regained most of his consciousness, he still froze and ran at the very sight of Harry, his eyes completely terrified.

He didn't remember anything that had happened then but somehow he knew Harry was specifically responsible, and it seems that every now and then Dudley would stare at Harry cautiously, as though waiting for the other boy to explode or transform into a demon.

That had been a couple of days ago.

He hasn't left his room since, choosing instead to brood silently to himself as he thought about the events that had happened. He had written dozens of letters to both Sirius *and* Draco but neither of them had responded, adding to his frustration as he sought to understand what was happening around him.

More than anything else, Harry was angry that he hadn't received a single letter from Dumbledore about the entire experience. He had written a letter to the headmaster himself, asking him about the events that had happened but even the headmaster had refused to answer him, choosing to leave Harry to his miserable thoughts and confusion.

In fact, through the last few remaining days of the summer, he hadn't received *any* letter at all—not even from the Ministry of Magic about proper punishment for his display of underage magic. Of course, while Harry didn't mind this, it was plaguing his thoughts and suspicions.

He knew something was up...And he had a sickening feeling everyone else knew about it except for him.

He was the dunce.

Angry, Harry shot up from his bed and stalked over to his school trunk. After rummaging around it for a good couple of minutes, he found the lighter Draco had given him for their birthday along with one of his quills and a small piece of parchment.

Walking over to his desk, he flicked the lighter open; enveloping the room in the faint green light of the lighter's fire. Then, almost furiously, he began scribbling on the parchment, his handwriting almost illegible with anger.

Tell me what's going on now. Otherwise, I'm running away.

Wrapping the parchment up into a small scroll, he approached Hedwig and tied it to her leg, offering her an owl treat as he did.

"Take this to Sirius."

Hedwig hooted her agreement, nipped his finger once and took off, her snowy white form disappearing into the clouds. Harry watched her fly away for a long moment, his thoughts still heavily infused with anger.

Then, sighing, he turned off the lighter he still held in his hand and collapsed onto his bed again, sinking desolately into the unmade covers. He felt exhausted and wanted nothing more than to be talk to someone who had outside information. Otherwise, he knew for certain that he was going to go insane.

He heard another soft knock on the door, causing him to look up halfheartedly in time to see his sister peer quietly into the room. Seeing the concern etched into her features, Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes and instead buried his face into his pillow. He knew Hermione and AJ were concerned about the events that had happened but he couldn't feel irritated with the way they were following his every move around the house.

He needed answers and unfortunately, they were just as ignorant of the outside world as he currently was. They couldn't help him.

"Harry? Can...we talk?" She spoke softly, biting her lip as she approached him. At her brother's silence, she sat down onto the bed beside him, her hand resting on his shoulder.

He grunted, shifting his position so that he was facing her with a disgruntled expression in his eyes.

AJ took a deep breath.

"Harry...This came in the other day for you." She said, her tone uncertain and her fingers shaking as she offered him a large, sealed envelope.

Sighing, he sat up and took the envelope in his hands, examining the familiar seal that had been stamped just above his name. He felt a sickening lurch in his stomach as he tore through the seal, pulling out the crisp white letter inside.

AJ bit her lip as Harry began to read it, somehow already sure of what it was going to say.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you have performed the Patronus Charm at twenty three minutes past nine several days ago in the midst of a muggle-inhabited area and in front of a muggle. This serious breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your possible expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Ministry representatives will be calling at your place of residence shortly to destroy your wand.

Your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 AM on August 12th.

Regards,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

AJ flinched as Harry's eyes flashed dangerously and he violently crushed the piece of paper into a small, rumpled ball. Igniting his lighter, he sneered to himself and held the ball right above the fire—engulfing the letter in a pale green flame. Finally, he hurled the burning ball across the room before collapsing back onto his bed, his eyes looking up at the ceiling.

Still sneering, he finally spoke, breaking AJ out of her own thoughts.

“At least I'll finally be able to see what's going on.”

Still unsure of what to say, she stood up and made to head towards the door when Harry stopped her, turning around to look her in the eye.

“You both believe me...*right?*”

AJ met his eyes with a calm, reassuring look, her lips lifting into a small smile.

“Harry...Even if you told me to jump off the London Bridge...I’d still believe you.” She told him softly, her voice gentle.

His eyes laden with anxiety, Harry nodded but asked again, this time his green eyes searching right into hers.

“And Hermione...?”

AJ didn’t look away from his intense gaze, her hand moving to squeeze his own very tightly.

“It wouldn’t even matter if you were telling the truth.”

His facial features visibly relaxing, he gave her a small but grateful smile and nodded as she walked out of the room, leaving him once more to his thoughts.

THUD. THUD. THUD.

Harry’s eyes snapped open from a light slumber, his muscles instantly tightening in suspicion.

What was that noise?

His eyes traveling around his dark bedroom, he kept his form perfectly still so as not to awaken Hermione—who despite having shifted her position in her sleep, was still peacefully snuggled against his chest.

He eyed his wand on his bedside table for a moment before he very carefully disentangled himself from Hermione’s sleeping form, moving carefully so as not to awaken the sleeping Gryffindor. She seemed to dislike the loss of body warmth but simply snuggled deeper into the pillows, curling herself into a comfortable ball.

Harry watched her for a minute, his expression softening as he pulled the blankets tighter over her body before silently reaching for his wand. Then, so as not to disturb the other occupants of the house, he made his way out of the room.

It couldn't possibly have been burglars. There's nothing to steal around here. More dementors, perhaps? He thought furiously as he crept his way through the darkness of the hallway, his eyes alert and flicking instantly at the slightest action.

Walking down the stairs, Harry carefully trailed the small beam of light he had summoned from his wand around the surroundings of the living room, the beam stopping as it rested on the heavy door serving as the house's entrance.

When he had assured himself that it had probably been nothing and began walking back up the stairs, he heard another—much louder—thud behind him, immediately causing him to snatch at his wand and whirl around in alarm.

“Show yourself! You—”

The words effectively died out on Harry's lips as the entrance door to the house promptly began melting off into non-existence and he found himself staring into the adamant, rather impatient face of Alastor Moody.

“Wha—Wha...? Professor M—Moody...?!”

The wizard in question merely glared at him, his magical eye whirring restlessly as he stepped into the Dursley's living room.

“Lower your wand boy, before you take someone's eye out. And don't call me Professor. I never did get around to teaching you, remember?”

His jaw still hanging, the Slytherin felt his outstretched hand collapse weakly back against his body, his form still trembling with what was probably relief mixed with utter confusion.

But then—almost instantly—his eyes flashed dangerously in suspicion and he had his wand outstretched once more in question as it pointed accusingly at Moody's chest.

"What are you doing here? How do I know which side you're on?" He asked suspiciously, his voice and form completely rigid with anger.

"We're here to pick you up, you festering git."

Harry's eyes widened in familiarity and disbelief.

Sure enough—as he let his eyes shift to the approaching figure behind Moody—he found himself staring incredulously at the rather disinterested expression of his best friend's face.

"Draco?"

Smirking at the remaining traces of suspicion still apparent on Harry's face, Draco stepped forward and allowed the other boy to see the silver earring in his left ear. At that, Harry finally exhaled a long deep breath and grinned at him in relief.

"You sodding idiot. Did you have to *pick us up* in the middle of the night?!" He asked irritably as he snapped his wand back into its case before looking up to glare at Draco in irritated query.

Before Draco could respond, however, another voice spoke up from behind them, causing both Slytherins to turn around and see Remus Lupin walking into the house, his wand ignited.

"Professor Lupin? What are you doing here?" Harry blurted out in disbelief, his eyes wide with confusion.

"What are we all doing muttering around in the dark? *Lumos!*" The voice had been female and had distracted Harry once again as he turned to face another figure approaching—this time one who was completely unfamiliar.

As her wand added more light into the dark room, Harry finally made out the small group of darkly cloaked wizards making their way into the living room—each one with their wands outstretched and looking

around their surroundings cautiously. Inspecting their faces, Harry made out Remus Lupin's handsome but otherwise tired face as well as the callous scars etched out on Moody's. Draco was evidently the youngest and looked extremely out of place as instead of the uniform black robes the others wore, he was wearing a cloak over a simple shirt and pants. As expected, his cloak was very similar to the one he had given Harry on his birthday.

"Oh...So you *are* as handsome as all those girly, teenage magazines claim you are." The female voice had spoken again, directing Harry's attention back to her in an effort to confirm who she was.

With the exception of Draco, she was observably the youngest and possibly the most attractive among the other women in the group. She had a pale, heart-shaped face, dark twinkling eyes and short spiky hair that were a striking shade of violet.

"You *do* look exactly like James." A bald, black wizard standing farthest from the back said, his voice deep and slow and his ear sporting a single gold hoop.

"He certainly does. His eyes are Lily's." Another wizard, wheezy-voiced and silver-haired, piped up from the back as he stared at Harry curiously.

"Well make sure it's him, Lupin. It'll be a sorry shame if we end up bringing a death-eater to the hideout." Moody growled impatiently, obviously through with all necessary introductions.

"I'm quite sure, Moody. But very well...Nevertheless...Harry...What form does your Patronus take?" Lupin finally spoke up in a soft, calm voice as he addressed Harry directly.

"It's a stag, Professor."

After staring at him carefully, Lupin nodded his agreement and turned his confirmation to Moody. "It's him, Alastor." He assured.

Moody simply narrowed his eyes, his magical eye resting intently on Harry's tense figure. "How can we be certain of that, Lupin? All you did was ask one question." He pointed out suspiciously.

“Who would you rather date? Pansy Parkinson or Millicent Bulstrode?”

“Screw you, Malfoy.”

Draco smirked pointedly at both Moody and Lupin, satisfied as he heard the muffled chuckles of the other wizards behind him.

“Yup. It’s definitely Harry Potter.” He declared, still smirking when Harry gave him a poisonous glare in response.

Lupin, however, wasn’t laughing as he stepped forward and took Harry firmly by the arm while the other wizards behind them shut the door quietly, peering out into the neighborhood from the windows.

“Harry...Where’s your sister?”

“She’s sleeping in her room, Professor. As well as Hermione. Why, what’s going on? Where are we supposed to be going? Are you all going to bring me to my Ministry trial?” Harry asked in confusion, his eyebrows fused together in query.

Lupin shook his head and gave him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about your trial now, Harry. Right now we have to focus on getting you out of here. You understand?” He asked but Harry shook his head furiously, his anger igniting.

“No, I *don’t*, Professor. Would anyone care to explain things to me?” He demanded, his expression focusing particularly on Draco, who promptly refused to meet his gaze. As everyone else, Draco chose to ignore his question and instead began heading upstairs.

“You boy, wait. Where are the Dursleys, Potter?” Moody asked gruffly, his magical eye rotating around the room to scan the area.

“They’re not here, they’re staying over at a rest house for the holiday. They won’t be back until tomorrow evening. Malfoy, where *are* you going?” Harry demanded, making to follow after the blonde but Moody held him back, shaking his head as several other wizards followed Draco upstairs.

“Relax, Potter. They’ll take care of your trunk and belongings and the girls as well. It’s best if we get things done as systematically as possible as it was planned. That way, the faster we can leave.” Moody explained, sounding impatient.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked, his eyes turning to Professor Lupin.

Lupin simply smiled at him and gestured to two more wizards over by the entrance. At once, both wizards nodded and headed outside with their wands held protectively ready.

“Somewhere hidden and safe. You’ll be staying there for the remainder of the summer.” He explained patiently before walking over to the nearest window and peering out into the dark alley beside the Dursley’s house.

“Does Dumbledore know about my trial?” Harry asked, suddenly remembering the letter that had been sent to him earlier that day.

At that, however, Lupin walked over to the violet-haired young witch peering through the other window beside him before turning to Harry with another small smile.

“Harry, this is Nymphadora Tonks.” He began, ignoring the look of derision she gave him in reaction to her name. “And please be reminded that she prefers to be called by her last name as she hates the name Nymphadora.” He added hastily, turning to meet her glare in amusement.

“So would you if your fool of a mother had called you Nymphadora.” She blurted out irritably before turning to give Harry a bright smile, which the Slytherin hesitantly returned with a nod.

“That wizard over there is Kingsley Shacklebolt.” Lupin continued, pointing to the tall black wizard standing near the door. Again, Harry silently nodded his acknowledgement, unsure of how to react.

Just as Lupin had just about finished introducing every wizard in the room, they all turned to see Draco and the others climb back down the stairs, their arms laden with school trunks and belongings.

“As you can see, we’ve got a number of wizards who volunteered to help us fetch you.” Lupin continued, watching as a flurry of emotions shadowed Harry’s face.

I didn’t need their help. He thought angrily to himself, his fists clenching.

As though the man had read his thoughts, Lupin nodded and spoke up again, his eyes bright with understanding. “I know that may make you uncomfortable, Harry...But nevertheless, it does make things faster. We’ve got fifteen minutes to prepare your things...We’re just waiting for the signal to leave now. So wand at the ready. You weren’t assigned a protection group for nothing.” He told him, nodding.

Just as Harry was going to respond with a snide comment, they both heard Tonk’s voice speak up cheerfully as she let her eyes roam around the Dursley’s clean and pristine living room.

“Impeccably clean, these muggles... aren’t they? My dad’s a muggle-born but was a complete slob. It must vary depending on the person.” She mused out loud, causing Harry to smirk slightly in amusement.

Looking up at Draco, he saw his sister draped rather delicately over his arms, her form wrapped in a soft white blanket. She was evidently still sleeping and had her cheek resting against Draco’s shoulder, her arms draped over his neck.

*Hermione...*He finally remembered and was about to head upstairs when he caught sight of another wizard carrying his girlfriend carefully down the stairs. Just like AJ, she was nestled in a bundle of blankets.

“Here, I’ll carry her.” Harry declared as he walked over to the wizard and allowed him to deposit the petite Gryffindor into his arms, causing the girl to squirm slightly in her sleep. The corners of his lips tugged slightly as he pulled the blankets tighter around her form, adjusting her so as her hands were circled around his neck.

“Look...I don’t know what’s going on...But what about Volde—”

“Shh! Shut your trap, boy!” At Moody’s snap, Harry’s eyes narrowed in irritation as he turned to look at the older man in question.

“We’re not allowed to discuss it right now, Harry. It’s too risky.” Lupin explained calmly as he helped the other wizards with Hermione and AJ’s trunks.

A short, stocky wizard began clambering down the stairs, the twins’ Owl’s cages in his arms. Another wizard trailed right after him silently, carrying Crookshanks and Asch. The kitten was currently trying to escape as he squirmed around uncomfortably now and then in the man’s arm.

“Right...And I don’t suppose any one of you can tell me where we’re going...?” Harry drawled sarcastically, watching as several wizards began reducing their trunks into small palm-sized pieces, placing them into their pockets.

“Relax, Harry...You’re going to be fine.” Tonks reassured him, giving him a saucy wink before promptly slapping Draco on the shoulder as she passed, causing the other Slytherin to wince in surprised pain.

“Watch it, *Nymph!* You may be my second cousin but that doesn’t mean I can’t hex you into oblivion.” He growled, struggling to shift AJ in his arms as he turned to face her.

“Quiet, all of you! You there, Potter...get me a glass of water.” Moody’s snapped out, wincing as his hand shot up and started fiddling with his magical eye.

“Get it yourself you old—”

“Harry!” Lupin admonished, giving the younger boy a dissatisfied look. Rolling his eyes, Harry sighed and walked over to the kitchen. When he had returned, he placed a cup of cold tap water on the counter in front of Moody, who promptly nodded his acknowledgment.

“That’s the ticket.” He growled before blatantly plucking out his mechanical eye with a sickening pop and plopping it noisily into the clear glass of water.

“Ugh...Moody, you *do* know that’s disgusting right?” Tonks pointed out in amusement, pointedly turning away to see the matching looks of uncomfortable disgust etched out into the others’ faces.

“Need to have my eye functionally properly for the journey back. Can’t be too careful.” Moody pointed out, wiping his eye before he carefully stuffed it back into its socket.

Harry had watched this with a grimace on his face, his eyes turning to meet Draco’s own rather disgruntled look.

“We’ll be waiting for just a few more minutes for the signal to move on. Everyone stay here.” Moody explained, moving his magical eye around the room in an effort to test its vision. Before long, he had sat up again and began walking towards the door.

“So...Potter...I hear you’re quite the flier. We’ll be flying our way there, just so you know.” Tonks mentioned casually as she walked up beside him, gesturing towards the broom Lupin had handed him.

“He’s excellent, Tonks. One of Hogwart’s finest.” Lupin answered, giving Harry a small smile which the Slytherin returned with a slight nod of his head.

“He’s not *that* good...” Draco grumbled to himself, rolling his eyes as he took out his own broom from a nearby wizard and adjusted AJ in his arms once more.

Harry was getting rather uncomfortable himself as he walked over to the couch and briefly deposited Hermione on it while they waited.

“Are you a Metamorphagus?” He suddenly asked, turning his attention to Tonks, who suddenly looked surprised at the recognition.

“Why, yes... I am, Harry. How did you come to hear of a Metamorphagus?” She asked him curiously, flashing him another wink before she promptly shook her hair into a bright bubblegum pink.

“I’ve read up on a lot of different things this summer. Mostly because no had been responding to my letters.” He pointed out, his hard gaze now resting on Draco who looked rather sheepish and turned away.

Tonks seemed to sense the tension and spoke again, her tone amusingly light. “Well, in any case...As you know, I can easily change my appearance at will. I was born one so you can imagine the high marks I got in *Concealment and Disguise* during Auror training.” She explained, looking self-satisfied.

At that, Harry looked surprised. “You’re an Auror? Then that means...Is everyone here who picked me up Aurors?” He asked curiously, turning to look at each of the wizards in query.

Tonks shook her head. “Not everyone. Kingsley has a bit of a higher position than most of us though. I’ve only just qualified a year ago. Nearly failed on *Stealth and Tracking*, you see... I’m dead clumsy.” She admitted.

Draco sniggered at that, causing Tonks to give him a feral glare.

She stopped however, when they heard a rather soft whistle from outside, causing Lupin to sit up from his position on the couch and gestured for them to get ready.

“That’s Moody...We’re clear to go.” He said, nodding as Draco and Tonks both passed him and headed towards the door. Harry watched them go for a minute before stopping to gather Hermione in his arms again, slowly walking towards the door after them.

Lupin stopped him however, and shook his head.

“Just a few things, Harry. Outside, Moody’s disillusioning Draco and the girls—I’m going to have to cast a disillusionment charm on you too. Just to prevent anyone from following us.” He explained calmly, taking out his wand.

Harry nodded and stood completely still as Lupin cast the disillusion charm on him, reminding him vaguely of the feeling of someone having cracked open an egg on his forehead. Looking down, however, he blinked in confusion as he saw nothing had changed at all.

Lupin seemed to sense his confusion and chuckled, shaking his head. “It’s a modified version of the disillusionment charm. It still allows the wearer and his friends to see him but he appears completely invisible

to strangers or to whom the charm was set against. We figured this would make it much easier to keep an eye on you.” He explained.

Harry simply nodded in understanding.

“Alright...We’re good to go.” Lupin said lightly, giving Harry a smile before he walked over and placed a single piece of parchment on the nearby coffee table.

“I’m leaving a letter for your relatives so they know we’ve got you and where to find you. It’s just for precautions.” He explained as he turned to Harry, who answered with a derisive laugh.

“Like they’d give a bloody damn, anyway.” He drawled out loud but Lupin didn’t answer, simply giving him another smile before leading him outside where he saw everyone beginning to mount their brooms.

Smirking to himself, Harry had probably never seen a stranger sight. Moody was heading the formation of several cloaked wizards half-mounted on brooms in the Dursley’s yard, all of which were looking up at the night sky.

If any muggle saw this...The Dursleys would be barking furious for sure. He thought to himself, chuckling as he walked over to stand beside Draco.

Moody was heading the pack and was inspecting the sky with his magical eye, his expression unreadable. “Could have done with a bit more clouds. Right. You! Potter!” He barked, both his eyes riveting towards Harry.

“We’ll be flying in close formation. Tonks will be right in front of you so keep close on her tail. Malfoy here will be right beside you so make sure you don’t lose sight of each other. And both of *make sure you’ve got a proper hold on those girls*, you don’t want them falling off during the ride. Nevertheless, Lupin will be covering you from below and I’ll be right behind you. The rest will fly ahead of us as a distraction in case we’re followed.” He ranted hastily, oblivious to the slightly confused look on Harry’s face just as the pack of wizards ahead of him took off, their cloaks swishing noiselessly behind them.

Draco smirked at his expression. "Relax, Potter. Just follow Tonks. That should keep you alive." He told him. He had adjusted AJ so that she was riding on his back now, her arms wrapped securely around his neck from behind for support. Seeing this, Harry did the exact same thing, whispering a spell to make Hermione's limp arms wrap securely around his neck.

"How did you convince them to bring you along for this, Drac?" He asked curiously, turning to the blonde. Draco gave him a superior smile as he began steadying himself on his Firebolt.

"My father's waiting for us there, Harry. I told him I wanted to come along and help fetch you so he managed to convince the Order to let me as long as Tonks would keep close watch over me. As I mentioned awhile ago, she's my second cousin so my father trusts her pretty well." He explained, watching as Harry's eyebrows shot up in surprise at hearing his explanation.

"Order? What do you mean by that, Draco?" He asked, his eyes glazed with confusion as he met the other Slytherin's uncertain face. However, Draco found that he didn't have to respond ahead of them, Tonks ignited her wand.

"Alright, everyone. Mount your brooms!" She announced sharply, turning back to face the sky.

"Draco..." Harry's voice spoke warningly as Draco and everyone else began to mount their brooms.

"I'll tell you all about it later, Harry. When we're not with other people." The other boy reassured him, nodding his assurance.

"Alright, let's go!"

At hearing Tonk's voice, Harry geared his Firebolt and shot upwards into the night sky, feeling a rush of exhilaration as he felt the cool wind blast upon his face. Checking to make sure Hermione was still clinging tightly behind him, he followed Tonk's figure up towards the clouds until they were high above the ground—far from the vision of any muggle in sight.

Beside him, he caught a glimpse of Draco shouting loudly as they headed towards the clouds.

“Seriously?! We’re going through the clouds?! We’ll all freeze!”

Harry grumbled rather loudly to himself as he and Draco followed Moody and the others towards a large neighborhood of muggle houses in London, each one numbered along the street.

The ride going there had been anything but comfortable.

As soon as they had plunged themselves into the clouds, the freezing moisture had finally caused Hermione and AJ to jolt awake in shock, both girls screaming rather loudly when they had gazed down and noticed they were far from the ground.

At that, everyone had stopped and whirled around in panic, causing formation to be broken and Moody to yell out incoherent orders infused with curses at everyone who had stopped in mid-air.

It didn’t help that when AJ had woken up, she had tightened her arms around Draco’s neck, nearly causing the Slytherin to drop her as he promptly choked for some air. Below them, Lupin had found the entire situation amusing but said nothing and soon, they were on their way again with Hermione irritating Harry by asking numerous questions rather insistently along the way.

The weather wasn’t particularly welcoming during their journey and by the time they had finally reached their destination and had landed safely on the ground, everyone was shivering from the cold temperature.

In silence, they walked pasted several houses until they got to the middle of both the residences 11 and 13 in which Moody stopped and began fiddling around for something in his pocket.

“Er...What are we doing, here?” Hermione finally spoke up as she looked at the empty wall in front of them in complete confusion.

“Shut up, Granger. Watch and learn from *real* wizards.” Draco drawled with a smirk, oblivious to the murderous glare Hermione had shot at him from behind. Beside him, AJ turned around and gave her an apologetic glance, which Hermione returned with a small smile.

“Ah. Here it is!” Moody pulled out a small rumpled piece of paper from one of his pockets and passed it to Harry, who raised an eyebrow as he read the short message written on it.

The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix can be found at number 12, Grimmauld Place, London.

After having read it, Harry looked up at him curiously.

“What—?”

“Finished, are you? Well go on then, give it your sister and to your girlfriend over there.” Moody instructed, looking around the street cautiously around them.

He did as he was told, letting AJ and Hermione read the single slip of paper before he turned to Draco, who shook his head.

“I already know, Potter. I don’t need it.” He explained, giving him a nod.

Harry looked slightly irritated at that but didn’t have time to dwell on it, as Moody soon snatched the piece of paper from him and began to hold it up above his lighter, setting it aflame.

After the paper had disintegrated into ashes, he then gestured back to the empty wall in front of them as though it was the obvious thing in the world. Harry, though, didn’t enjoy being left out in the dark.

“Er...What exactly are we supposed to *do*?” He asked rather snidely, his eyes narrowed as he looked accusingly at Lupin.

The older man looked slightly apologetic, gesturing back to the wall in front of them. “Just think about what you read, Harry. It should appear.” He explained and not long after he had said it, Hermione’s

eyes had widened and she began clutching Harry's arm tightly in amazement.

"Harry! It's the *Fidelius Charm*! A magical concealment of houses!" She whispered into his ear, watching in awe as the 11th and 13th muggle houses magically began moving in separate directions in front of them—giving way to a small entrance right in between. Strangely enough, it didn't look as though the muggles in both houses had even felt their houses move at all.

They began walking up the worn stone steps and followed Moody through the newly materialized door entrance into a small dark hallway. Instantly, his nose was filled with a distinct rotting smell as they walked through it, clambering in silently before Lupin shut the door behind them.

In front of them, Moody had ignited a nearby lamp which encased the small narrow corridor in a faint yellow glow. Then, turning to Harry he hastily removed his disillusionment charm—as well as the others'—before continuing on forward, igniting hall lamps along the way as he passed them.

Harry turned to Draco, who was the only one among the four of them who wasn't looking around the place in silent query.

"Draco...Where are we?" He whispered, nudging the blonde slightly.

"Order of the Phoenix headquarters. It's the organization headed by Dumbledore and a couple of others working to fight against the Dark league. My father's recently just been accepted into it, thanks to Dumbledore's and Snape's help." He explained, keeping his voice in a low whisper so as to avoid being heard.

Hermione looked surprised at this and turned to give the blonde a suspicious glare. "Your father's a death eater, Malfoy. Why would Dumbledore trust him? He's probably working as a spy against all of us." She hissed angrily at him, causing Draco to darken slightly in anger.

"Don't you dare talk about my father, mudblood. You don't even belong here, this is a *wizard's* quarters. Why don't you go outside and

join your muggle friends?" He taunted, causing AJ to sigh and Harry to roll his eyes.

"How did *you* know about all this, Draco?" AJ finally spoke up, turning to face him in question in an attempt to cut off another snide comment.

It seemed to work as Draco nodded and continued. "Father brought me here about a week ago. He said something about the manor being unsafe as it was occasionally being used to hold meetings with several death eaters so he let me stay here instead. He made up some excuse about me temporarily staying with my cousin Caitlin in France." He stopped as they finally reached a door at the end of the hall.

It was a couple of seconds after knocking that they heard heavy footsteps before the door suddenly swung open. Lucius Malfoy, walked out calmly, his facial features expectedly regal and his robes immaculate. At the sight of Harry and AJ, he gave them a politely reserved smile and bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment.

"Harry...AJ...I am pleased to see that you made it here safely. Draco, why don't you escort them upstairs to their rooms? It seems I have several matters to discuss with some of the members of the Order." He spoke, his voice soft and calm but otherwise firm as Tonks, Lupin and the other Aurors seemed to nod and entered the room behind him, leaving Moody behind.

"Alastor...?" Lucius asked curiously, a rather derisive smirk on his face as he raised a single elegant eyebrow at him.

Moody narrowed his eyes at the blonde man, his fingers clenching tightly around his wand. "I don't know what Dumbledore sees in you that he trusts so willingly, Lucius. But you'd better watch your back. I know exactly what you're up to." He warned, his voice turning dangerous.

Lucius merely blinked, giving the other man a mocking smile.

"As you—Alastor—I am merely fighting for the ideals I believe in. I do not want my family to fall to the same fate as mine...My motives are

simple. You'd do well not to stand in my way." He answered, his silver eyes glinting dangerously.

Keeping his eyes narrowed at Lucius, Moody simply growled and clambered past the former Slytherin, shutting the door loudly behind him.

At that, Lucius turned to Draco once more, smirking before he removed a piece of lint from his son's shoulder.

"You all head on upstairs to rest, I'm sure you've had a tiring night." He told them, nodding as both AJ and Hermione began climbing up the stairs. When the girls had gone, however, he turned to both Harry and Draco, his voice dropping into a low whisper.

"Harry...I have several things I need to explain in full detail to you about what's been going on. I fear it's much more serious than I expected. There are things you need to know." He told him, his eyes darkening grimly.

"What do you mean, Mr. Malfoy?" Harry asked in confusion, his eyebrows fused together as he tried to comprehend what the older man was saying but Lucius shook his head, looking around the corridor.

"I will talk with both you and Draco later at night. When everyone's asleep. Black will be there as well, he and I have been discussing this for some time." He informed him, causing Harry's eyes to widen at hearing of his godfather's presence.

Seeing his expression, Lucius chuckled and nodded. "Yes, Potter...Black is here. Although currently, I believe he is inside being pummeled with accusations by Molly Weasley so he told me to tell you he'll come up to see you right after the meeting." He told him. Harry nodded but Draco's face seemed to turn sour at the news, causing his father to smirk.

"Yes, Draco...The Weasleys are still here." He told him, much to his son's immense disappointment.

Draco grumbled at that, causing Harry to smirk as well and look at Lucius in question. Lucius gave him an amused smile.

“Since I brought Draco here a week ago, he’s had to put up with the company of the Weasleys since then. Mind you, there’s more of them upstairs beside your rooms—Merlin forbid, you know how much children they have, the place was swarming with redheaded idiots.” Lucius told him, causing Harry to laugh lightly.

Draco, however, didn’t look amused. “You wouldn’t have found it funny if you had to live with the company of seven Weasleys for a week. Dinner was literally a fist fight.” He grumbled moodily, causing his father and Harry to chuckle again.

“As soon as he heard the news you’d be staying here before school, Draco was ecstatic and wanted to come help pick you up as soon as possible. Up until now, all he’s been doing is reading in his room and picking occasional nasty fights with the Weasley children.” Lucius added, causing his son to glare at him.

“Father, don’t you have a meeting to be in?” He asked pointedly, causing Lucius to chuckle once more and nod, giving them a last smirk.

“Very well, then...I’ll leave you two to pick fights *together* with the Weasley children now. I shall talk to you both again later.” He told them before he turned and opened the door, allowing Harry to see a glimpse of his godfather seated at the far side of the room.

Sirius managed to flash him a goofy grin before Lucius had closed the door, sealing it from inside with a silencing and locking charm.

As soon as they were alone, Draco turned to Harry, giving him a grin. “Come on, I’ll show you where we’ll be staying. You can’t sleep with Granger here, I’m afraid...We’ll be staying in one room while AJ and Granger share another. House Molly Weasley’s rules of propriety.” He told him, smirking at the slightly irritated look on Harry’s face.

“It figures.” He answered; he followed Draco up a flight of stairs and down another dark and dusty corridor. As they passed several rooms,

he heard the faint, indistinct chatter of the Weasley children, causing him to roll his eyes.

Draco smirked at his expression. "We'll go bother them later, Potter. Don't be so excited. Here we are." He said as they arrived in the room at the end of the corridor, pushing past the small wooden door. Harry paused to notice the fact that the doorknob was shaped like a serpent's head.

Harry caught a glimpse of gloomy, high-ceiling double bedroom before his attention was drawn to the white snowy owl resting on a nearby table.

"Hey Hedwig...Like the new place?" He asked absentmindedly as he stroked her feathers for a brief moment before turning around to inspect at the surprisingly large bedroom. His trunk had been placed on one of the beds while he saw Draco's opened near the large closet, its contents folded neatly on the cover.

Locking the door securely behind him, Harry walked over to his bed and plopped down lazily before turning piercing eyes at Draco.

"Alright then, Malfoy. I want to know *everything*."

"I can't believe we're here...I almost thought of it as a bad dream when I woke up dangling in the sky awhile ago." Hermione exclaimed as she collapsed onto the soft mattress, turning to give AJ a smile.

AJ laughed and sat down on the bed beside hers, her eyes inspecting the large neat room they had been given. "Well it certainly was an experience." She agreed, reaching over and giving Asch, who was mewling adorable on her bed, a light scratch on the head. The kitten whined a bit but soon settled down and curled up near her pillow, falling into a deep sleep.

At that, Ferio gave an indignant hoot of annoyance, immediately causing AJ to laugh and walk over to the male owl. "Alright, you...You always have to be the center of attention, don't you?" She teased, stroking his feathers and offering him an owl treat.

Hermione shook her head, giving AJ a smirk. "I swear, AJ, you spoil your pets too much." She pointed out, causing the Slytherin to give her a glare.

"By the way, where are the boys staying?" She asked, causing Hermione to give her a teasing smile. "They're at the end of the hall. Ginny will be staying with us, by the way...Ergo, the third bed over there." Hermione answered, pointing to the other bed near the window.

AJ looked surprised. "Oh...I thought that was just an extra bed. Ginny's here...? So that means the Weasleys are—"

"Yes, they're here too. I talked to Ron, Fred and George awhile ago while you went in first. I was surprised though, I didn't expect to see them at all during the summer but I'm glad they're here. Ginny should be heading up soon, they said she was taking a shower right now." Hermione explained as she stood up.

Walking over to their closet, she opened the door to find Ginny's trunk already laid out rather messily inside—some of her clothes hanging haphazardly from several hangers.

"See? They've been staying here for over a week now. Since their parents are active members of the order. You should come with me to hang out with them sometime." Hermione invited, giving AJ a smile.

AJ shook her head hastily, an embarrassed blush on her face. "Oh no, no, *no* Hermione. It's alright...I'd be really embarrassed to. They don't exactly like me after all...Especially after all the things I've done to them in the past." She admitted, looking rather guilty.

But Hermione shook her head, giving her a reassuring look. "Unless you're awkward about seeing the guy you used to snog in secret before, I'm sure you'll be just fine. You've never been directly on their nerves anyway...it's always been the dunderheads you always hang around with." Hermione pointed out, causing both girls to giggle.

AJ blushed even darker at the mention of her former crush on Ron.

"That was a long time ago, Hermione. I'd rather forget about it." She replied hastily, shaking her head in dismay.

Just as Hermione opened her mouth to answer, their door swung open and a freshly showered Ginny Weasley entered the room, her eyes widening slightly in surprise as she caught sight of her new roommates.

"Hermione!" She squealed as she rushed forward to hug her friend tightly. Hermione laughed and returned the hug, pulling back to give the redhead a grin.

"Hey, Ginny...Hope you haven't bored yourself out yet without me." She quipped, smirking when Ginny rolled her eyes in response.

"Hey, Potter...Long time no see." She greeted AJ, nodding rather uncomfortably. AJ waved it off however and walked over to them, giving the girl a genuine smile.

"I'm pretty sure you would have wanted it longer, huh?" She teased, causing both Gryffindors to laugh in spite of themselves.

"Yeah...Well...Since you're here, there's nothing more I can do about it." Ginny replied easily before giving the Slytherin a friendly smile.

"So, Ginny...How's everything been going around here? Has Malfoy been giving you all a hard time?" Hermione asked as they sat down. AJ stood up and shut the door to their room before joining them, her ears piqued with interest.

"Not really...Mostly, he's locked himself in his room studying, refusing to mingle with any of us. Which reminds me, Mum says Hogwarts will be sending out the Prefect positions tonight. Are you two nervous?" She asked, giving both girls an encouraging grin.

At that, AJ's face fell and she bit her lip, looking slightly nervous.

"Oh bugger...I'm not so sure I'll qualify as a Prefect. I didn't do so well in my subjects last year because I had missed out on so many classes..." She thought out loud, looking slightly anxious but Hermione squeezed her hand, giving her a reassuring smile.

"I'm sure you're still the top girl among your housemates, at least. Dumbledore has absolutely *no* reason *not* to choose you. I'm sure it'll work out." She told her. AJ seemed to accept this for the meantime and nodded, still biting her lip.

"By the way...You'll be happy to know that Michael and I broke up." Ginny piped up, instantly causing Hermione to snap her attention back at her in alarm.

"What?!"

Ginny laughed and rolled her eyes, looking amused. "We broke up just last week. I dumped him—he was just getting too pushy and controlling for me. I was fed up with it." She said simply, shrugging.

AJ smirked at her attitude, shaking her head. "Wow, Weasley...You *do* seem to go by the boys quick." She teased, looking amused.

Ginny returned her smirk, nodding her agreement. "Well I'm looking for the right one...Of course I have to sample the platters. If it wasn't for Hermione here, I would have *loved* to sample your brother at least once." She kidded, causing AJ to cringe and Hermione to swat her painfully on the arm.

"Hands off Harry. He's mine." Hermione stated, a playful smile tugging on her lips. At that, AJ pretended to gag and shot up from the bed and headed towards the door.

"Aw, come on. Come back, AJ...It wasn't *that* disgusting." Hermione called after her but AJ laughed and shook her head. "I know, I was kidding. I'm heading over to Harry's room for a minute. I'll catch up with you guys at lunch." She told them, giving them a last grin before she closed the door behind her, leaving the two Gryffindors to themselves.

Ginny turned to Hermione, looking genuinely surprised.

"You know, she doesn't seem so horrible now as she was back then. What happened over the summer, anyway? Did you erase all her memories or something and reprogram her?" She kidded, causing Hermione to laugh.

“Oh, Ginny... She’s just...Well, she’s trying to change from the person she was back then. She’s really a great friend once you get to know her. In fact, I’m surprised she lasted in Slytherin this long given her personality.” She mused, shaking her head.

Ginny grinned rather widely at that. “Well if it means you’d be hanging around some of the sexiest bastards in the school, why wouldn’t she survive there?” She pointed out, giggling when Hermione shot her a smirk.

“You’re still hung up about Nott then, huh?” She said knowingly, causing Ginny’s eyes to widen as she hastily hurled a pillow at her friend’s face. Hermione ducked the onslaught and gave her another teasing smile, nodding.

“I can ask Harry about him for you, if you want...?” She teased further, causing Ginny to shriek laughingly and aim another pillow at her in embarrassment.

“Maybe set up a blind date for the two of you?”

“Hermione...”

“And plus, you’re single now. Isn’t that *awfully* convenient?” Hermione had raised a single eyebrow in amusement.

“Shut it. I do *not* like him.”

“But you think he’s extremely attractive and charming, don’t you?”

“HERMIONE!”

At that, the older girl collapsed onto the bed in a fit of giggles, leaving Ginny staring at her in utter disgust.

“Come in.”

At hearing Harry’s voice, AJ pushed open the door and walked into the room to find both her brother and Draco immersed in a rather

large, bounded old book, its thick case black and slightly withering away.

Seeing her walk in, Draco immediately shut the book with a snap and walked over to her, leaning down to give her a lingering kiss on the cheek.

“Missed me, have you?” He teased, smirking when AJ blushed red but nodded, looking down as she hugged him rather affectionately and snuggled herself against his chest.

Draco had to smile at the cuteness of the action and planted another kiss on the top her head, hugging her tightly.

Behind them, Harry gave a loud disgusted snort just before he shook his head. “Oh, give me a break. You’re making me sick.” He drawled, causing his sister to glare at him.

“Hey, you gave me a lot of things to be sick about during the summer so you shut up right now.” She retorted, sticking her tongue at him.

Harry smirked at her in response before leaning back against his bed, folding his hands behind his head and closing his eyes.

“Then go snog outside. At least give me dignity...Don’t give me the horrible image of my sister and my best friend making out in front of me.” He quipped, causing Draco to smirk but nod as he pulled AJ out of the room into the empty corridor, shutting the door behind them.

“Draco, I don’t think he meant for us to snog outsi—”

The words had died on her lips as Draco had leaned forward and pressed his lips firmly against hers, his arm snaking around her waist and roughly pulling her body tightly against his.

AJ blinked in surprise but let herself be pulled toward him, instantly melting into his arms as she felt him wrap his arms securely around her waist. She closed her eyes and wrapped her own arms around his neck, pulling him closer and kissing him back in matching intensity.

She felt his tongue teasing her lips and she instantly opened her mouth to allow him to taste her just as a moan escaped her lips. She felt him smile against their intertwined lips, his other hand moving to gently caress the curve of her waist before resting just above her hips.

She pressed herself closer against him, aching for more of his fiery touch on her just as Draco pushed her gently against the door behind them, using the leverage to crush their lips tighter against each other.

She moaned again as he used his body to pin her firmly against the door, slowly moving the free hand he had on her hips to travel up inside her shirt until it rested rather possessively on her breast, causing the girl to shiver.

Just as he was about to deepen the kiss, the door they were leaning against gave out, immediately causing them both to pull back and curse loudly as they came crashing back down into the room, Draco falling on top of AJ rather ungracefully.

Still cursing and slightly red from the kiss, Draco glared up at Harry's smirking face as he watched them attempt to disentangle themselves from one another. He gave them an innocent smile, shrugging.

"I was going to go to the bathroom." He told them casually, smiling again before whistling rather loudly as he walked past them, shaking his head. Before he left however, he looked over his shoulder and gave Draco a smirk.

"Oh...By the way...Draco... I think you need a cold shower." He pointed out, smirking wider when Draco flushed even darker and slammed the door in his face, cursing incoherently. After shouting out a bunch of locking and silencing spells, he turned once again to face AJ, who was now looking rather unsure of herself.

Raising a single eyebrow, he quirked the corner of his lips into a sexy half-smile, looking slightly amused at her uncertainty. "What's wrong, duchess?" He asked, walking over to her and tipping her chin playfully.

AJ bit her lip, looking up at him with wide eyes.

“Draco...If I wasn’t the girl you thought I was...Would you still be with me...? Would you...still love me?” She asked rather shakily, looking up at him with wide, bright green eyes.

Draco looked genuinely surprised at her question but pulled her towards him in a comforting, warm embrace. He stroked her hair affectionately and gave her a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

“What do *you* think, you ugly idiot?” He teased half-heartedly, lightly poking her on the ribs. AJ squirmed but laughed and wrapped her own arms around him, sighing contentedly.

“Now that I have you, I’m not going to let you go.”

She smiled at that and tipped her chin upwards to meet his lips in a gentle kiss, moving her arms upwards to wrap around his neck. Draco returned her kiss easily, gently pushing her backwards until she gasped when she had fallen against the soft mattress behind her.

“Potter...You are aware that your trial is tomorrow morning, right?”

At hearing the roughly spoken voice, Harry looked up from his half-eaten plate of food to find himself staring at the stern face of Alastor Moody, who was seated across from him on the large round dining table.

Harry flashed him an arrogant sneer.

“I already told him, Moody. Don’t worry. He isn’t nervous...Aren’t you, Harry?” Sirius piped in, grinning before turning back to huge amount of food he had piled up onto his plate.

“Black, have you lost your manners?” Lucius drawled coolly, watching the other man devour his food in obvious disdain.

Sirius growled at him. “Hey, lay off. You weren’t the one who spent 12 years in Azkaban, Malfoy.” He retorted, his voice derisive.

“Oh let him eat, Malfoy. Just because *you* don’t appreciate my cooking doesn’t mean Sirius here should do the same.” Mrs. Weasley declared, shaking her head as she took in Lucius’ untouched plate.

“Forgive me, but I’m used to the expertly prepared dishes at the manor.” Lucius answered calmly, causing the woman to roll her eyes and Arthur Weasley to give him a threatening glare.

“You should be *thanking* my wife, Malfoy. What happened to *your* manners?” He snapped pointedly, causing both Lucius and Draco to sneer at the same time.

Harry had tuned himself out at this point, knowing full well how long and awkward this dinner was going to be. It was nine in the evening and the most haphazardly matched group of people had gathered around the dining area.

Molly Weasley had prepared dinner that night and although Harry had to admit her cooking was definitely a big improvement over his sister’s, it still irked him that he had to share a rather large table occupied mostly by the Weasleys.

Sirius sat across from him as well, right beside Alastor Moody. He and his Godfather had talked before the meal but Harry was still eager to spend some more time with Sirius if only to catch up on all the things that had happened in the Order when he had been away during the summer.

He knew his Godfather would be more than willing to talk about anything and it irritated Harry that Molly Weasley had kept interrupting their conversation over the table, nagging Sirius how it wasn’t right to tell Harry such issues.

At that, he saw Sirius eyeing Molly irritably as well but eventually the table around them fell into an awkward silence. Lucius Malfoy, who was seated between Sirius and Draco, had positioned himself as far away from the Weasleys as possible. AJ sat right beside Draco, who in turn was picking at his meal in exhaustion.

Although Harry was thankful that he had sat himself right between Draco and Hermione, choosing to sit next to Hermione meant sitting

near Ron Weasley as well, who was right beside her. Next to Ron, of course, was the rest of his family.

Nearly every Weasley turned to look at him in curiosity, causing Harry's left eye to twitch slightly in irritation.

"What?!"

Fred Weasley flashed him an easy smirk, shaking his head. "Nothing. Just wondering what you'd look like if you had two heads. Or four eyes." He said out loud, causing Ron to snigger loudly.

"It isn't difficult to imagine, Weasley. I'd look like *you*." Harry retorted easily, this time causing Draco to smirk in amusement.

"I'm flattered, Potter...But I doubt there's a potion that can mimic our genuine good looks. If you're interested in improving your horrible appearance, I can help though." George Weasley quipped, winking discreetly at Ginny.

Ginny rolled her eyes and went back to her salad, shaking her head at her brothers' antics. Hermione was glaring pointedly at the twins but they both didn't seem to see her as they gave Harry a rather nasty grin.

"Shouldn't you save some of that face-improving magic for your brother, *Ronald*, over there? His face looks like a cross between a troll and an idiot." Draco spoke up snidely, causing Harry to chuckle and even AJ to hide a smile.

Ron flushed in embarrassment and gave Draco his meanest glare.

"Yeah well at least I'm not a ferret-face like you." He retorted easily, causing AJ to stifle another smile as she turned to hide her face away from Draco.

Draco, however, didn't seem amused by this and stabbed rather moodily at the food on his plate. Hermione had watched the entire exchange with a bored expression on her face.

"Harry, has Dumbledore mentioned anything to you about your trial?" Hermione asked in concern, glancing carefully at her boyfriend who chose to look away from her worried features.

"No. The old fool hasn't said *anything* about what's going to happen or if he's even going to be there at all. Apparently, he doesn't give a crap." He snapped irritably, causing Arthur Weasley to give him a reprimanding glare.

"Now, now, Mr. Potter...I'm sure Dumbledore has his reasons for all this. In any case, he was the one who personally instructed me to escort you to the Ministry of Magic tomorrow for the hearing, I'm sure you'll hear from him soon." He assured him, meeting his wife's disapproving look.

Harry merely snorted. "You? Why can't Lucius escort me? Why you?" He asked rather rudely but Hermione gave him a pointed glare.

"Harry, of *course* Lucius can't escort you. How do you think it'll look if a supposed death eater escorts you to the trial?" She reasoned out, squeezing his hand gently to ease her attention back to her.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Harry disappeared on the spot...under Lucius' care..." Moody muttered loudly, causing Sirius to cough uncomfortably and Lucius to look at him with fury in his silver eyes.

Not wanting to cause a spat between the two men, Sirius spoke up hastily, turning his attention to Harry. "Harry, don't think about Dumbledore for now. Right now, just clear your head for tomorrow...I have a feeling they're going to grill you for any piece of evidence they can use against you." He said, shaking his head grimly.

"Of course they are. You know bloody well what the Ministry is on about, Black...It is precisely what I wish to explain to Harry tonight." Lucius drawled, his gaze turning away from Moody and meeting Harry's for a minute to remind him of their talk later before he turned back to his untouched platter once more.

"Wish to explain *what* to Harry tonight?" Hermione asked out loud but Harry instantly squeezed her hand tightly with his, shaking his head

to indicate her silence. She blinked in confusion but nodded reluctantly, turning back to her plate.

There was a long moment of awkward silence before Molly Weasley spoke up again, rising from her seat on the table.

“Anyone care for some more mash potatoes?” She asked gingerly, looking at them expectantly with a big bowl of mash potatoes in her arms. No one was given a chance to respond however as at that particular moment, a horde of owls swooped in from the window and began circling around their table, much to everyone’s surprise.

“Good heavens! Do they have to interrupt us during dinner like that?!” She exclaimed as she nearly dropped the bowl in her hands as several owls flew past her as they headed for her children.

“It’s alright, Mum! It’s our Hogwarts letters...We were expecting them today.” Ginny explained as she detached hers from a large tawny owl, who hooted in acknowledgment before taking off again.

Hermione bit her lip nervously as she detached her own letter, waiting in bated breath until everyone was busy with their own parcels before she began to open hers.

Almost immediately— as soon as she had opened the envelope— a small, shiny silver badge slipped out into her open palm, its surface shimmering proudly against her skin. She felt her heart momentarily stop beating as she read the inscription on it.

Hermione Granger – Gryffindor Prefect.

“Wow, hey! Hermione! You got one too! This is so wicked, I never expected to be chosen as Prefect!” Ron exclaimed as he saw her eyeing her badge, waving his own Prefect badge at her from his seat.

At hearing that, Fred and George turned to look at their brother in evident disgust while Ginny simply rolled her eyes.

“Well I wasn’t surprised with Hermione but Ron? How did *you* get to be Prefect?” She asked, snorting in disbelief. Ron glared at her but she ignored it, turning back to her food.

“Congratulations, love...Although I really didn’t have doubts.” Harry whispered into Hermione’s ear before leaning down to give her a lingering kiss on the cheek. Hermione blushed in pleasure but nodded and gave him a bright smile.

“Oh I’m so proud of you, Ronald!” Molly exclaimed as she rushed forward to hug her son tightly, ignoring the loud complaints and gag noises Fred and George were making beside her.

Watching all this, Harry simply rolled his eyes and turned to look at Draco, who was eyeing his own Prefect badge with a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“Heh. So you got it after all, didn’t you Drac?” He commented, smirking when Draco gave him a grin, nodding.

Lucius gave his son a proud nod, an arrogant smirk on his face.

“Congratulations, Draco. I knew you’d make it. You *are* a Malfoy, after all.” He told him haughtily, failing to notice Sirius rolling his eyes at Harry behind him.

“I *was* anticipating it too, actually. Did you get yours too, AJ?” Draco asked, looking over to glance at AJ. The girl was shaking visibly in her seat, her face pale with shock.

Draco’s smile instantly transformed into a worried frown as he took in her expression. “AJ, what’s wrong?” He asked softly, his eyebrows fusing together.

Upon hearing his voice, AJ slowly turned to look at him, her eyes wide and slightly misty with hushed emotions.

“I...I...didn’t make it...” She said out loud, causing Ron, Hermione and Ginny to glance at her in surprise and shock.

Draco’s own eyes widened slightly at that as he snatched her letter from her hands, opening it to reveal the simple standard Hogwarts letter inside— devoid of both a Prefect badge or a list of Prefect responsibilities.

"I don't understand...You're...*not* a Prefect?!" He demanded, his voice cracking slightly as he processed what he had just said.

"I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding, AJ." Sirius explained softly, his eyes softening in concern as he took in AJ's delicate expression.

"Surely Dumbledore wouldn't have screwed you over like that just because you fucked up fourth year? He *knew* the circumstances of what happened." Draco reasoned out loudly but AJ began waving their concern away, shaking her head.

"Just forget about it, Draco—"

"I'm so sorry, AJ...Do you want to talk to Dumbledore about it?" Hermione piped up, walking over to her in concern but AJ just flushed darker in utter embarrassment and humiliation, her eyes blurry as she kept her face down to avoid anyone seeing them.

Unfortunately, Harry— who up until that particular moment had been unaware of the commotion around him— exclaimed rather loudly as he opened his own letter to reveal the shiny silver badge inside.

"Alright! Drac, AJ, Hermione! I made Quidditch Captain! This is incredible!" He exclaimed excitedly, glancing over at them in anticipation of an acknowledgment.

All three of them stared blankly at him, Draco and Hermione both looking slightly uncomfortable and biting their lip.

It was a couple of seconds before AJ's face finally crumpled and she shoved her chair back violently, stalking out of the room in utter humiliation. Harry's face dropped as he watched her go, looking to both Hermione or his Godfather in confusion.

"What—?"

"AJ! Come back!" Draco called desperately as he rushed after her, leaving his food and letter on the table and storming out of the room.

Harry turned to look back at the table in an awkward silence, watching as one by one, each of the Weasleys began gathering their things and walking back upstairs to their rooms.

Both Lucius and Sirius stood up and walked towards the parlor in silence. As he passed him, Sirius gave Harry a sympathetic smile, placing a firm hand on his shoulder comfortingly before they left him to his thoughts. Alastor gave Harry a long, pensive look as he stood up before he began walking quietly out of the room with the others.

When only he and Hermione were the only ones left in the room, he turned to look at her in confusion. "I don't understand...Did I say something wrong? What happened?" He asked her, his eyebrows fused together in agitation.

Hermione bit her lip, shaking her head.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Harry...You just...picked the wrong time to exclaim so loudly like that...Especially since your sister was really disappointed at not having been made Prefect this year." She ignored the furious look on Harry's face and continued.

"It was rather unfair of Dumbledore not to choose her." She explained, sighing as she sat down on one of the empty seats.

Harry was livid, however and slammed his envelope down onto the table.

"That stupid fool didn't choose her?! Bloody hell, what is his problem?! There is *no one* in Slytherin who is better suited to be female Prefect than my sister, she had the highest grades in our year!" He raged loudly, his green eyes flashing in violent anger.

Hermione winced as his voice rose but she nodded her agreement. "I know, Harry. She *did* mess up pretty badly last year but that was only because of the events that had happened...It's rather unfair to judge her based on that. She was really hoping for this position all summer...She's really disappointed." She told him, shaking her head.

Harry didn't seem to be listening and snatched Draco's envelope from the table, ripping it open to read the contents inside.

"I'm going to kill that crackpot fool. Who did he choose as female prefect then?!" He growled under his breath as he scanned through the letter Dumbledore had written.

Dear Mr. Malfoy,

Congratulations! Due to the consistent academic excellence and commendable leadership skills we have seen in your first four years of Hogwarts, I am proud to inform you that you have specifically chosen to be one of this year's House Prefects.

Attached with this letter is the list of responsibilities you are to undergo throughout the year with your House partner, as well as the scheduled meetings and assemblies you will be asked to attend in representation of your House. The following is the complete list of selected Prefects as well as this year's Head Boy and Head Girl.

Gryffindor

Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger

Hufflepuff

Ernie MacMillan and Hannah Abbot

Ravenclaw

Terry Boot and Marietta Edgecombe

Slytherin

Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson

Head Boy: Nathaniel Townsend – **Ravenclaw**

Head Girl: Paige Richards – **Slytherin**

Our Head Boy and Girl will be available should you have problems with your responsibilities. Please allot them the proper respect and obedience.

Also note that you will be working with all other Prefects this year to build inter-house unity, student cooperation and to ensure that Hogwarts continues to be the fine academic institution it is as it is led by young student leaders such as yourselves.

We hope to expect more great things from you in the future. Cheers and we look forward to another great year with you at Hogwarts!

Yours Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Harry flung the letter down in irritation, sighing and shaking his head in dismay. *Pansy Parkinson?! As much as Harry didn't want to admit, disregarding AJ altogether, Pansy was the most academically competent among the other girls in their year— but she wasn't anywhere near his sister's level.*

He felt irrationally angry at Dumbledore once more— for everything that seemed to be going wrong and he couldn't wait to face the man if only to confront him with all the decisions he's been making that's been screwing up his life.

"Harry? Calm down, alright? I'm sure AJ doesn't blame you for what happened...She just needs some time to herself." Hermione told him gently, placing a hand on his arm but Harry's eyes flashed dangerously and he shrugged it off, shaking his head.

"That's not it, Hermione! It's Dumbledore! I hate the stupid man's guts! He hasn't explained a *single* thing to me all *summer*, Hermione! I'm beginning to think he's playing me for a bloody fool!" He exploded, swiping his hand at a nearby goblet of juice and spilling it all over the table.

Hermione winced at his angry outburst but remained with him, nodding and knowing full well it was probably better to keep silent

than to argue with him. She knew Harry when he was angry well enough to keep a safe distance until he had calmed down.

“Hell, I don’t even *know* what’s going to happen at the trial tomorrow! I might not even be going to school at all this year, if I get screwed over by the Ministry. Then, what?!” He continued, hurling the now empty goblet into the door everyone had vacated through, causing it to shatter noisily into the silence.

Hermione bit her lip, her eyes tearing slightly in fear at his anger but still she kept her place, hiding her face away from him lest he explode further over her crying as well.

By this time, Harry was breathing very heavily as he sat down beside her, slamming his fist angrily into the table. It was a long moment of silence before she heard him speak again, his voice barely audible.

“I want to kill him.”

“Wh-What?!” Hermione looked up with wide misty eyes, her face pale at hearing not only the spoken words but the voice that had spoken them. It had been deep and maniacal, almost hissing with sadistic vehemence.

The voice she heard hadn’t been Harry’s.

“H-Harry...What did you say?” She asked, her voice in a shaky whisper as she looked up and met his eyes.

Harry blinked back at her with a blank expression.

“What are you talking about? I didn’t say anything for the past two minutes.” He snapped irritably, narrowing his eyes at her shaking form.

She swallowed the forming lump in her throat but nodded, still slightly shaken as she took a long swig of the goblet of water in front of her.

I was hearing things. She convinced herself, her heart still pounding rapidly against her chest in fear.

You were hearing things, Hermione...That's all. Relax. She told herself again, taking a long deep breath and trying to calm her racing heart just as Harry took a long sigh beside her.

He turned to look at her, the anger in his eyes replaced by a mild glint of an apology. Giving her a small tight-lipped smile, he gestured for her to come over, enveloping the petite girl into his arms.

"I'm sorry, Hermione...I guess I'm just so worked up these days...With everything that's been happening. I realize I'm acting like such a jerk lately." He spoke softly, nuzzling his cheek against her hair as he held her in a tight, comforting embrace.

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes as she sighed against him, reveling in the warmth she found in his embrace. "I understand, Harry. If anything, These times are difficult for you, I know that." She assured him, squeezing his hand.

He didn't respond but instead hugged her tighter, one of his hands going to stroke her hair affectionately. "Things will get better, I promise...Let's just wait it all out until we finally get to Hogwarts..." He assured her, leaning down to give her a brief comforting kiss on her lips.

She nodded once more, sighing in relief when her racing heart had finally subsided allowing her to shake the disturbing experience from her mind. Instead, she focused on Harry's words, letting them sink into her head as she wrapped her arms tighter around him, almost in an attempt to convince herself they were true.

Everything is going to be alright.

Pulling away, Hermione turned to look at Harry's half-eaten plate of food. "Would you like to finish your dinner first? I'm going to head upstairs to take a shower." She told him, making to stand up from her chair but Harry shook his head and gave her a suggestive smirk.

"I'm actually hungry for something else at the moment." He drawled in a low tone of voice, a sensual chuckle escaping his lips as he stood up and began leading her up to his room.

Hermione protested weakly, trying to pull her arm free from his grasp. He wouldn't have any of it; however, as he simply laughed and bent down to effortlessly pick her up —her legs draping over his arm.

“Harry! Mrs. Weasley specifically told us about doing stuff like this in the Headquarters!” Hermione hissed at him as he carried her over to their room at the end of the hall, pausing to lock the door behind them.

“So? *She* doesn't own this house...My Godfather does.” He responded easily as he deposited her onto his neatly made bed, frowning briefly at the ruffled sheets on Draco's.

Sick...I will not think about what happened in there a few hours ago. He thought to himself, shaking the thoughts furiously away.

“Are you sure we're not going to get caught, Harry?” Hermione asked uncertainly, watching as Harry began to cast silencing charms as well as locking charms on the door.

When he was done, he turned around and gave her a grin right before he began pulling off his sweater to reveal the white collared shirt he wore underneath.

“Of course I'm not. But you have to understand my beautiful little *Prefect*...Things are always so much more enjoyable when there's the slightest chance of being caught.” He told her, smirking before he captured her lips in a searing kiss.

Hermione giggled in spite of herself, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“If you say so, Captain.”

“AJ!”

Just as she was about to slam the door to the room she shared with Ginny and Hermione, Draco shoved himself against it, forcing himself in. She sighed and turned away from him, burying her face into her hands as she collapsed onto her bed.

“What do you want, Draco...? Just leave me alone...” She whispered softly, still hiding her face from him as he sat down beside her, placing a hesitant hand on her shoulder.

He was silent for a minute, watching her carefully, choosing his words.

“I just want you to talk to me...About anything...I don’t want to see you like this.” He admitted, waiting as she took a deep, unsteady breath. She stood up and walked away from him, shaking her head and clutching her sides.

“I’m...fine, Draco. I’ll be okay. Just... Leave me alone for awhile.” She responded, refusing to meet his eyes.

Draco gave a sigh in slight frustration as he glared at her form.

“Look...Stop crying okay? We’ll talk to Dumbledore about it when we get to Hogwarts. I’m sure it was all a big mistake.” He assured her.

His voice was firm and sure of himself but AJ shook her head again, her shoulders slumping slightly.

“What if it wasn’t, Draco...?”

The words had been so softly spoken that Draco barely heard it as he walked toward her with a puzzled expression on his face.

“What are you talking about, AJ? Of *course* it is! You can’t *not* be Prefect—I—We had already planned that out during the summer! We were planning to spend a lot of time together, remember? You’re the brightest girl I know in Slytherin, you can’t *not* have been chosen!” He told her irritably, giving her a disbelieving look.

AJ sighed again and finally turned to look at him, the expression in her eyes defeated. “That’s just it, Draco...What if I’m *not* all those things...? What if I was just...*me*...?” She asked him in a hushed whisper, looking up and meeting his eyes.

Draco looked back at her in confusion, shaking his head.

“I don’t understand.”

AJ walked over to him, reaching over and taking one of his hands in hers and squeezing it gently. “What if this *wasn’t* a mistake...? What if deep down... being Prefect...or—as you say—the *brightest* girl in Slytherin was never me? Or was never really something I wanted to be?” She asked him, watching his expression carefully.

Draco’s eyebrows seemed to meet one another, almost expecting her to laugh and declare everything she was saying as a joke.

“What are you saying, AJ? That you *aren’t* smart? That you don’t want to be *Prefect*? What do you want to tell me?” He demanded impatiently, his voice tinged slightly with anger.

AJ opened her mouth to respond but Draco cut her off again, shaking his head. “If you’re worried about the humiliation of asking Dumbledore for the change, I’ll ask my father to help us. I’m sure he’ll set things right. Academically speaking, we can defend your case easily anyway—”

“*NO!* Draco...” AJ took a deep breath and massaged her temples in frustration, trying to phrase herself more clearly as Draco snapped again.

“Then *what*, then?! *What* are you trying to say?!” He raged, this time not bothering to hide the irritated expression on her face as he waited for her to explain herself.

AJ inhaled a couple more times before she began to speak, leveling her voice carefully. “I *don’t* want to be Prefect, Draco...Perhaps I never did. In fact...I don’t like being associated with being the *smartest* in Slytherin...I studied *hard* to earn my grades...I was never as naturally intelligent as you...Nor do I possess any amount of leadership skill or ambition in me enough to be Prefect.” She told him, gauging the flurry of reactions that had occurred on his face.

He was silent for a moment and AJ took that as an opportunity to speak again, looking slightly uncertain.

“I just want to hang out with friends...Enjoy my classes without any pressure...Live my life freely the way I never got the chance to.” She continued, raising her hands up helplessly at him.

Draco was speechless as he stared at her, his eyes wide and disbelieving. It was like he was seeing her for the first time and he didn't like it one bit. The unfamiliarity of everything she had said had scared him. It was never something he had ever expected her to say.

"I don't know what to say."

Everything she had said hurt him...Because in doing so, she was in fact, denying every single thing about herself that had made him fall in love with her in the first place. Her intelligence, her biting wit, her strong sense of ambition. Everything he had ever known her to be, she had slapped back into his face.

AJ's eyes were pleading as she stared at him, biting her lip in nervousness.

"*Please*, Draco... Say you *understand*. That you still love me... Just like you said you would ...*Please*." She whispered, her voice shaking slightly as she took in his unreadable features.

"What else should I know?" Came the harsh reply, causing her to flinch as she collapsed onto her bed again, shaking her head furiously.

"I don't *know*, Draco! I'm not the same girl I was back then...I don't know...I just feel so uneasy with the way I've let myself grow up to be! I...I don't want the same things anymore...I'm becoming a completely different person, Draco!" She exploded, tears now freely flowing down her eyes as she looked up at him.

Upon seeing her tear-streaked face, Draco's features softened slightly and he sat down beside her, wrapping her in his arms and letting her cry softly against his chest.

He didn't say anything.

He couldn't trust himself to say the right words even if he tried.

Instead, he held her in silence— waiting until her sobs and his own anger had subsided before he said anything else.

When she had finally calmed down, he tilted her chin up to meet his face, giving her a weak smile.

“So...You won’t save me from having to have Pansy as my partner Prefect this year...?” He teased lightly, watching as AJ managed a weak laugh in response.

“So Pansy’s the new Prefect huh?” She asked, wrinkling her nose in slight disdain. “I suppose... As long as she keeps her filthy paws to herself and off of you, I’ll be okay.” She responded easily, looking slightly jealous but otherwise giving him a warm smile.

Draco gave her an amused grin, poking her playfully on the nose.

“Now *there’s* the AJ I fell in love with.” He teased before dropping a light kiss on the spot he had touched. She rolled her eyes at him but soon snuggled closer against him, closing her eyes.

“Draco?”

“Yes, AJ...?”

She pulled back from his embrace and looked at him with an intense expression on her face.

“You...really won’t hate me if I become...different?” She asked him, her voice dropping to a low whisper.

Draco looked at her for a long moment, studying her features— from her green eyes to the long black hair that cascaded gracefully down her back. He lifted his hand and ran it gently down the strands. He had always loved the way her long hair looked on her and the sophisticated expression in her eyes.

“If I didn’t know any better...I’d say it was *because* you were different that I fell in love with you in the first place. No matter how much you change, I promise that I will *a/ways* love you.” He admitted, caressing her cheek.

It seemed to be the right answer as AJ's face broke out into a small smile. She leaned over gave him a brief kiss on the cheek before pulling him down against the bed to snuggle against him.

"I love you so much, Draco." She whispered, snuggling closer to him so that her cheek was pressing against his chest and listening to his heart.

Draco stared up into the ceiling, contemplating on the way her words had struck a nerve of fear in his heart.

"I love you too."

Alright, maybe I should have eaten that plate of dinner awhile ago. Harry thought to himself, his stomach grumbling as he sat up in his bed later that night. Hermione had long gone back to her room by then while most of the lights in the hallways had been switched off, enveloping everyone in a dark, eerie silence.

Looking around, he jumped when he saw Draco smirking from him right across the room, the other Slytherin holding the lighted tip of his wand up against the book he was currently reading while propped up against his headboard.

"Bloody hell, Draco... You scared me. What are you still doing up?" Harry demanded, rolling his eyes as he stretched and sat himself up, looking around the room for his wand.

Draco shrugged, adjusting his reading glasses briefly before he turned back to his book. "I couldn't sleep...So I thought I'd finish up on this book I received from Professor Snape for my birthday until I did." He told him, flipping a page before resuming his reading.

Harry shook his head. "I swear, Malfoy, you are such a nerd. When did you get reading glasses anyway?" He asked curiously, gesturing to the silver frames.

At that, Draco glowered slightly. "Just this summer. I suppose I've been reading too much that I strained myself...Which reminds me,

when did *you* lose yours?" He asked pointedly, removing his reading glasses and placing them—along with his book—on the table beside his bed.

"Optus potion. Hermione made it for me for my birthday. I doubt it'll work for you though...It only fixes astigmatism." He told him, smirking. Draco looked slightly irritated at that but shrugged, giving Harry a smirk.

"I only have to wear them when I'm reading anyway. Unlike the geek *you* were back then." He retorted, sniggering when Harry narrowed his eyes at him.

"I'm going downstairs to get something to eat...I think we were supposed to meet your father in the parlor by 12." Harry said, hoisting himself out of bed and grabbing his wand. He adjusted his pajama bottoms for a moment before he turned to Draco, who was now putting the book neatly back in the drawer.

"Yeah, alright...I'll go with you, Potter. I know how much you're afraid of the dark." He mocked, sniggering as he avoided the foot Harry had blatantly stuck out to trip him as he was walking towards him.

"If you didn't want to be alone in here in the *dark room*, Malfoy, all you had to do was tell me." Harry smirked back, shaking his head as they silently made their way outside into the dark, empty hallway.

Inside the other rooms, they heard the distinct sounds of Ron Weasley snoring and talking in his sleep, causing both Slytherins to smirk before they headed downstairs toward the kitchens.

Just as they had reached the bottom of the stairs however, Harry's foot had stuck out in front of Draco again, causing the blonde to trip instantly—and rather ungracefully down against a nearby portrait, knocking its covers off its hinges.

Struggling back up, Draco whirled on a sniggering Harry behind him.

"Potter! You imbecile—"

"*Wretched ingrates!*"

Both boys froze and instantly whirled around at having heard the high-pitched shriek, their eyes widening as they caught sight of the uncovered painting behind them of an old woman in a black cap screaming haphazardly at them.

“Potter and Malfoy! Blood traitors— How dare you bring such filth into the noble house of my fathers?! How dare you align yourselves with such scum?!” She shrieked again, causing both Slytherins to wince in pain.

Harry eyed her appearance in slight disgust, watching as the old woman began drooling and her eyes began rolling up to the back of her head, the yellow skin on her face stretched taut as she continued to scream the most vile of swear words at them.

“How dare you uphold yourselves as heirs to your families?! You’re both a disgrace to all purebloods alike! You’re—” She shrieked in anger when Sirius had suddenly come up behind the gaping Slytherins and covered her painting hastily, wincing in embarrassment.

“Ah...Forgive me...I see you’ve both met my mother. A charming woman she was back then...Still is now, isn’t she?” He quipped sarcastically before turning around to give them an amused smirk.

“Er...What’s...*wrong* with her?” Harry asked awkwardly, his eyes riveting back to the covered painting and shivering slightly in disgust in spite of himself.

“Well...She was never really one to share the manor with people she didn’t particularly like...Probably one of the reasons she despised my being home then.” Sirius added almost bitterly before he turned to both of them, raising an eyebrow.

“But enough about her for now...Harry, I’ve been meaning to show you something.” He said, giving his godson a nod before he gestured for them to follow him through another long corridor.

Meeting Draco’s curious look, Harry merely shrugged and followed after the older man, pausing every now and then to examine the

displays of house elf heads that had been lined up against the walls of the house.

“Did your parents have a habit of collecting...er...house-elf heads or something...?” Harry asked bluntly, raising an eyebrow when he saw Draco sniggering lightly at him.

“It’s a tradition, Potter. All pureblooded families keep the heads of all the house-elves that have served them through many generations and display it...I’m pretty sure the Potter family had done the same throughout the generations as well.” He explained just as Sirius led them round a corner.

“Draco pretty much explained it there, Harry. Although personally, I never really appreciated how all those head looks myself...” He quipped, chuckling grimly.

Neither of the two boys responded as Sirius pushed through a rather large door and revealed a large, dark room. He jumped, however, upon seeing a small figure turn slightly to glare at them with large ball-sized eyes.

“Bloody hell! Kreacher!” He exclaimed, cursing loudly when the elf gave all three men a grimace of dislike.

Harry instantly blinked at the sight of the house-elf, observing instantly how he looked nothing like any other house-elves he had seen before. With the exception of the dirty loincloth it had tied around its middle, the elf was naked and looked very old—with its skin so wrinkly it looked as if it was too big for it.

Although he was bald like most other house elves, several strands of white hair poked from just behind his bat-like ears and some parts of his forehead. Its eyes were bloodshot and its nose was large, resembling a snout. Observing it carefully, Harry took a careful step forward.

“Kreacher is sorry...He is not seeing the Young Master enter.” He muttered darkly under his breath, bowing down to Sirius at the sight of him but otherwise keeping a scowl on his face. “Nasty bit of a

blood traitor he is... He added to himself, although surprisingly audible enough to still be heard.

While Sirius just rolled his eyes, Harry narrowed his eyes at the house-elf, walking forward and looking him down. "What was the last bit, elf?" He demanded, his green eyes flashing indignantly.

Kreacher looked up at him and bowed again, keeping his face hidden.

"Kreacher said nothing, dear sir..." He responded easily before he turned around, muttering once again. "And now he brings his godson in here...Harry Potter, the delusional boy who seeks attention and tolerates mudbloods... Master Draco is wrong to have ever become friends with such a liar."

"You good-for-nothing—"

"Harry, forget it! It's alright...He's been like that ever since." Sirius interrupted him, sending the house-elf away from them with a dismissive, curt wave of his hand.

"Right away Master...Vile, filthy ingrates thinking they can order Kreacher so easily around...If only my Mistress were still alive..." Kreacher mumbled again, stalking past both Harry and Draco as he headed for the door.

At Draco's smirk, Harry didn't know whether to find the situation amusing or not. Instead, he rolled his eyes and waited until the elf had left the room before he shut the door behind him, switching the lights on.

"I apologize for Kreacher, Harry. He never was a pleasant house-elf...At least not to me." Sirius admitted, shrugging noncommittally before he turned to inspect the room around them, gesturing for them to walk up beside him.

"I remember that...Although he did seem to take a great liking towards your brother though, didn't he?" Draco piped up, causing Sirius to give him a dirty glare.

“Drop it, Malfoy. I’d rather not bring that up.” He grumbled, ignoring the curious look Harry had given him.

“What?” He asked, looking from Draco to Sirius but neither answered him, both of their attention focused intently on the large wall in front of them. Harry followed their gaze, his eyes widening when he saw exactly what Sirius had wanted them to see.

In front of him, his eyes widened as they fell upon a very large and beautiful tapestry. It looked incredibly old but otherwise very well-maintained as Harry easily read the big bold letters written at the top:

The Noble and Most Ancient House of Black

“Toujours Pur”

“Your family tree?” Harry asked in amazement, his eyes trailing down from the different names interconnected to one another as he searched for his godfather. Sirius nodded silently, his own eyes inspecting the large tapestry before them.

Draco remained silent, tracing out the names with his finger silently until he came across a specific name he had been looking for. Harry didn’t see this, however, as he turned to Sirius with a questioning look.

“Sirius...You’re not on here...?” He asked, his eyebrows fusing together.

Sirius nodded with a wry smirk, raising a hand and pointing to a rather large, smudged black area on the wall beside the name *Regulus Black*. Connected right to it with a thin black line was a large black stain and underneath it, Sirius brushed the dust off the name plate, revealing his own name— *Sirius Black*.

“I used to be there...But my mother... bless her... burned me off the day after I ran away from home...” He drawled bitterly, sighing as he lightly touched the black spot with a strange look on his face.

Harry and Draco both turned to look at him in silence.

“You ran away from home...? When?”

Sirius smirked slightly and turned to give them a grin, shaking his head. "I was young then...Completely irrational. I was sixteen...I went to your dad's place, Harry. Your grandparents were really nice about it then...took me in as a second son." He told him, smiling slightly at the memory.

"Why did you leave...?" Draco asked bluntly, regretting the words the instant they had left his mouth.

Sirius shook his head, looking away. "Because I hated the lot of them, my family. All of them...With their pureblood mania and their superiority complex...Regulus, my idiot brother...believed them though." He continued, looking up again to eye the picture of his brother up on the tapestry.

Harry followed his finger, noting the date of death that followed after Regulus' name. "He was younger than me...The perfect son." Sirius added bitterly, sighing as he turned away from the picture.

"How did Regulus die? I never really found out..." Draco asked, his eyes moving back to focus on a single name on the tapestry.

"Stupid idiot...He joined the death eaters..." Sirius answered, scoffing to himself. At Harry's shocked look, he shook his head hastily. "My parents were never death eaters, if that's what you're thinking Harry...But they *did* agree a lot with the ideas Voldemort supported. They were just as scared as everyone else though." He grumbled, his eyes narrowing at the memory.

"Was Regulus killed by an Auror, then?" Harry asked, looking slightly tense.

At that, Sirius shook his head. "No...He was killed by Lord Voldemort...Or on his orders at least. From what I hear, he panicked and tried to back out of an assignment." He told them, his eyes growing weary.

Seeing this, Harry decided to let the subject drop as his eyes turned back to the tapestry before them, observing its connections. After a couple of minutes, he spoke up again, genuinely curious.

“Does *my* family have a tapestry like this one...?” He asked out loud, causing Sirius to chuckle and give him a wry smile.

“I’m pretty sure you do...Although I’m not sure if it’s still in Godric’s Hollow. You’ll find that somewhere down the line, we actually have a *lot* of ancestors in common... As well as yours, Malfoy.” He quipped.

Draco nodded, giving Sirius a wry smirk as he pointed at a single spot in front of them. “I think I’m aware of that, Sirius.” He commented, his finger just below the name *Narcissa Black*, who was connected with a single line to *Bellatrix Lestrangle*.

Sirius chuckled at the shocked expression on Harry’s face, nodding his affirmation. “Yes, Harry...Draco’s mother is my cousin. As well as her sister...Bellatrix Lestrangle...Last I heard, Bellatrix was still in Azkaban...She was a *passionate* supporter of Voldemort.” He recalled, shuddering slightly at the memory.

“Now you know why Sirius and I seem to share so much family history.” Draco said wryly.

Harry was curious now as he continued to inspect the tapestry, hoping to get additional information. After a long pause, he looked back up to Sirius again, looking amused.

“So that means you and Tonks are related too?” He asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

Sirius chuckled and nodded, pointing to another dark smudge right above Tonk’s name. “Her mother, Andromeda, was my favorite cousin...She was the sister of Narcissa and Bellatrix. She’s not here either though...She was cast out of the family for marrying a muggle...Unlike her sisters who managed lovely and *respectable* pureblood marriages.” He recounted, sighing in slight disgust.

Draco looked slightly perturbed at that. “Hey...My mother and father love each other very much. It’s nothing like that, Sirius.” He pointed out, causing Sirius to give him a nod of acknowledgment.

“I know, Draco. I didn’t mean it as any form of offense. I apologize.” He said, giving the Slytherin a small smile. Draco nodded and

watched as Sirius smirked slightly at the tapestry again, his eyes widening with familiarity.

"I haven't looked at this for years... There's Phineas Nigellus...My Great-Great-Grandfather...He was the least popular headmaster Hogwarts had ever had...and Araminta Meliflua...A cousin of my mother's...She...Tried to force a ministry bill to make muggle hunting legal..." He told grimly, his face turning slightly red in barely contained aversion.

He pointed to another name just above Araminta Meliflua, giving Harry a small grin. "And over here...is Jonathan Potter...An uncle of your father, Harry..." He explained, causing Harry's eyes to widen.

"Potter...? So...we're related too?" He asked, looking confused.

Draco gave him a smirk, shaking his head at his ignorance.

"All the pureblooded families are related, Potter...in one way or another...Most probably, I think you and AJ are like...my fifth or sixth cousin somehow if we look up the records. Upholding pure marriages, there aren't really that many choices. If we ever get the chance, I'll show you *our* tapestry...I'm pretty sure we've had a lot of common ancestors in the past." Draco explained, giving him a half-smirk.

Harry was having a difficult time taking all this in as he sat down a nearby chair, taking a deep breath.

"Bellatrix and her husband, Rodolphus Lestrage are both in Azkaban for having tortured the Longbottoms...I'm sure you know that story." Sirius told him as his eyes passed darkly over Bellatrix' name again.

"Both of you never mentioned all this before." Harry pointed out irritably, turning to give them a glare.

Sirius returned the glare easily, his eyes narrowing.

"Does it matter, Harry? Do you think I'm *proud* to have had relatives like this...? Look up the history, Harry...My family was nothing more than a race of bloodthirsty idiots. Purebloods are so arrogant, they've

become so blind to the truth.” Sirius told him, causing Draco to glare at him in defiance.

“I knew your father, Harry...and I knew his family. The Potters weren’t exactly an innocent lot as well if I recall correctly...There were numerous mass murders of muggles in history that were traced back to your ancestors and even then, those were the ones who were *caught*.” He told him, causing Harry’s eyes to darken in dismay and disbelief.

“Hey, lay off Sirius. We don’t need to take this all out on each other like this.” Draco interrupted, shaking his head furiously.

At that, Sirius sighed and nodded, burying his face in his hands. Harry hadn’t said anything up to that point, simply staring off at the tapestry in front of him and reflecting on the words his godfather had spoken.

So we’re all the same then... Killers with blood on our hands... He thought darkly, his eyes filling with a sense of shame and intense anger that he hid his face away from the other two in the room.

Sirius sank exhaustedly into a couch near the room’s entrance, taking a deep breath. The room was silent for a long moment, all three men avoiding each other’s eyes. Neither one of them spoke again until they eventually heard a soft knock on the door, causing Sirius to snap back into attention.

Struggling to stand up, he walked over to stand in front of the door.

“Who is it...?” He asked cautiously, one hand on the doorknob and another raised up to indicate to the younger two to remain silent.

“Black. It’s Lucius... Let me in.”

A/N: Cliffhanger? Haha. Well not really... But in either case, I just didn’t know how to end the chapter. I’m sorry if this chapter was a bit uneventful...I promise they’ll be back at Hogwarts soon enough. Perhaps the chapter after the next...Depending on the length. And

again, I apologize for my incredibly long absence. Writing time is such a luxury for me nowadays. Also...I realize Marietta Edgecombe *may* be a year higher than Harry in the Canon but let's just assume that for AAA, she's in the same year. :smile:

Anyway, **REVIEW AND TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK.** Reviews from you guys really do help me out by giving me ideas about what else I can incorporate into the story...(Hint-Hint: Like who I can pair up with Blaise and Theodore. Heehee.) So please don't hesitate to tell me your thoughts. :wink-wink: Till next time!

